HIDE IN THE DARK

FRANCES NOYES HART


Characters
"Scene:
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The
Old
Graveyard
"Grand
Fathers
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HIDE IN THE DARK

BOOKS BY

FRANCES NOYES HART

CONTACT AND OTHER STORIES

THE BELLAMY TRIAL

HIDE IN THE DARK

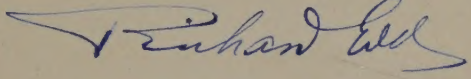
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HIDE IN THE DARK

BY

FRANCES NOYES HART



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FIRST EDITION

TO

MADRE

Time

All-Hallows Eve, 1928

Place

Lady Court, an old manor house
south of Washington

Characters

LINDY MARSDEN, lonely, lovely, a dark-eyed romanticist, and mistress of Lady Court.

DOUG KING, hilarious and jovial, the life of every party and the founder of the March Hares.

NEIL SHERIDAN, sleek, dark, highly successful in his career as a lawyer, and husband of

TRUDI, wise, witty, and chic, with all the ease of manner of a grand duchess, and the lack of manners of a fishwife.

CHATTY ROSS, small, gay, blindly adoring wife of

TOM ROSS, the least successful man in the room, shabby and sensitive among his wealthy friends.

HANNA DART, a gentle lady, immaculately beautiful, whose reserve masks a deep affection for her husband.

GAVIN DART, a rather tired and immensely successful business man of fifty with shrewd dark eyes and steel-gray hair.

RAY HARDY, the youngest member of the party, not long married and overwhelmingly in love with

JOEL HARDY, her charming and irrepressible husband, who has not grown five minutes older in the last ten years.

JILL LEIGHTON, graceful and gracious, stepsister of that legendary Sunny, the beloved girl whose strange death ten years ago still lay like a shadow over the gay group.

LARRY REDMOND, an agreeable young banker who cannot understand why Jill hates him.

KIT BAIRD, wanderer and adventurer in strange lands, who in his casual way does every romantic thing magnificently well.

HIDE IN THE DARK

I

The room was waiting. It was an old room; a hundred years ago it had been younger, filled with laughter and candlelight and the sound of music and dancing feet . . . and that fainter sound of hearts beating and hearts breaking—the room knew that sound well. It had known other things well, too, even then—that strange thing called life, that stranger thing called love, that strangest thing of all called death—even a hundred years ago these were as familiar to it as the winds that blew through its great windows, as the shadows that flitted across its high, panelled walls.

It is still beautiful, with the imperishable beauty of a woman whose bones under her fine flesh are so essentially right, so exquisitely proportioned, that age and neglect, hunger and sorrow and loss have left her lovelier than ever. Long since, the pale ivory panellings of its walls have deepened to amber, the peacock-blue of the damask curtains has faded to turquoise and jade, the gilt of the great clouded mirrors has shadowed and tarnished—deep in its dust and dreams it has slept, heedless of the passing years, tramping relentlessly across a burning world; heedless of life itself, far from its tall barred doors. And now, not an hour since, rough dark hands have set all the crystals of its girandoles and chandeliers to ringing their little bells in protest at this rude freeing of them from the discreet veils of dust; they have unrolled the Persian rugs huddled

together so comfortably in the far corners—rugs that had been old when the room was new, and that now spread their beauty gently, like little pools of changing water. Those same hands have twitched carelessly away the sheets beneath which the furniture crouched quietly, once more releasing the beauty of wood so shiningly pale that it is golden—so shiningly dark that it is black—releasing, too, the faint shimmer of silks and damasks and brocades, repeating endlessly the drowned harmonies of seaweeds and sea-flowers.

The love-seats that flank the great fireplace had once struck a braver note of heartening red, but they, too, have suffered a sea change into coral, faint and strange; so has the huge sofa that faces it, and any stray mermaid would feel at home searching for treasure in the tall lacquered chests beneath the palladium windows that break the panelled walls at the far end.

The hands have gone now, leaving behind them a room drowned in beauty and strangeness and silence—an old room, waking slowly and painfully from old dreams. For a long time it has had only the shadows and the wind for tenants, but on this late October evening it stirs and murmurs, and holds its breath to listen. What does it hear coming to it down the years—those lost and unforgotten sounds of dancing feet and laughter? Something else with them? Something else unforgotten, too? Perhaps it is only the wind—but the room shivers, and draws its shadows closer about it, as though it were cold. . . . And suddenly the air without is filled with voices, and the voices are filled with laughter; there are feet on the threshold, hands at the door—the room, grave and beautiful and silent, draws the shadows closer still. Life is coming back to it once more . . . and the room is afraid.

"Doug! Doug, did I give those other keys to you? I can't make this wretched thing work at all, it won't even turn halfway."

"Here, let me have a go at it. No, that's no good."

"Lindy! Lin-dy! Do we tell the chauffeur not to come back till Friday afternoon? What time did you order yours?"

"Four o'clock. Look *out*, Larry; if you twist it like that you'll snap it off."

"Great suffering cats, I left every one of the cigarettes in that infernal car! Call him back, can't you, Trudi? What's his damn silly name? Jollifleur—hey, Jolli——"

"His name's Bonnicourt, darling. Don't froth—I've got a thousand in that black bag. Lindy, for the love of liberty, get that door open. I'm frozen clear through the marrow of my bones. Oh, God be thanked!"

The door creaks, yields, swings wide—and the room, invaded by that sudden flood of light and laughter, laughs, too, and looses its shadows with a lovely gesture of welcome.

"Oh, Mrs. Marsden, what an absolutely divine room!"

"I'm glad you like it—it's yours, too. And don't dare to call me Mrs. Marsden; Lindy's not a bad name at all, and I've found out already from Joel that you're Ray instead of Rachel. Now are we all here? Two Darts, two Hardys, two Rosses, two Sheridans—that's eight, and Kit, Larry, Jill, Doug, and me—how many is that?"

"Thirteen," said the gentleman called Hardy obligingly. "Ask me something hard; I love higher mathematics."

"Thirteen? Truly? No—it's too perfect." She lifted a

dramatic hand. "It was All Hallowe'en in the Year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and twenty-eight; the long autumn shadows were just beginning to fall as the thirteen tired travellers drew up about the great fire——"

"The trouble with you, love," remarked the one called Trudi bitterly, "is that you let your imagination run away with you. The thirteen weary travellers is a good realistic touch, but when it comes to great fires—well, I only hope to heaven that the spirit of prophecy is descending on you."

"A fire *would* be nice, wouldn't it?" murmured Lindy Marsden, stripping off her pale suède gloves lazily. "Kit, you used to be the Fireman, didn't you?"

"The Fireman by all means," said the red-headed young man by the door. "The best builder of fires since Nero, but neither a wood-chopper nor a beast of burden. The only material for fires that I see around here is some rather nice Sheraton furniture——"

"Oh, dear!" mourned Lindy contritely. "I told that worthless darky if he didn't have every single thing ready for us before he cleared out for Washington he needn't ever come back. I wish to goodness I hadn't given him a holiday! It's a good quarter of a mile to the woodshed, isn't it?"

"Our fault, Lindy! March Hares never, never will have slaves. On our way, boys; many hands make light work and all that kind of stuff. Little Lindy shan't get cold while Doug's here. Fireman, save my child!"

"No, you don't," said Trudi with decision. "Little Lindy, indeed! How about little Trudi, you great galoot? I don't know who invented the idea that the broadtail is a fur-bearing animal. I'll lay a pretty sum that you could freeze ice-cream any day in the right kind of a

broadtail coat. A quarter of a mile to the woodshed, says she! Well, there are more ways of killing a cat than stuffing it with butter, girls and boys. How far is it to the ice-box?"

"First turn to the right through that door," said Lindy, and added mildly, "It's probably empty."

"Ah, well, that's easily remedied. Doug shall come along and run a little water up my sleeve, and I'll bring you back as pretty a collection of ice cubes as ever you seed in all your born days. No loitering around while we're gone now, children. I want the Butcher, the Baker, and the Candlestick-maker all to be on the job by the time I get back, and more especially the Barmaid. Got the key to that trunk, Sherry?"

"Yes'm," said her docile spouse.

"All right—shoot. The little green squatty devil down in the right-hand corner has the absinthe in it. To be used with a light but lavish hand; don't fail me!"

Lindy Marsden murmured dutifully, "Wait a minute —I'll come, too, and see whether he left any wood out there," and slipped lightly off in the wake of the charming, husky voice and the deep booming one. As they died away, a man's voice said judicially from the shadows:

"Trudi's immense. Every day in every way she has gotten better and better. Of course, I've seen pictures of her every week or so in the rotogravure section, but hearing is believing. She's certainly the most amusing person in North America, isn't she, Sherry?"

"Or South," said the proud husband. He was practically standing on his head in an effort to dislodge the green bottle.

"Ten years," murmured Kit Baird. "I hope the rest of you are as nice as that when you get your hats off

and a word in edgewise. Does she always run on like that, Sherry?"

"More," said Sherry cheerfully, emerging with the bottle and placing it tenderly beside three others on the mantelpiece. "What you've just been listening to is one of her silent, brooding spells. They come over her every now and then. Ever see a bigger and better shaker than that, Hanna?"

The blonde vision by the empty fireplace huddled deeper into her sables and murmured, "Not ever," in obligingly impressed tones, and the quiet man beside her said mildly, "I don't want to introduce a jarring note, but I do think that it would simplify matters if I had the faintest idea as to who some of you are. My own humble rôle is that of Hanna's husband."

"Do you honestly mean that Hanna hasn't spent her married life telling you about us?" inquired the dark young man that someone had called Joel in obvious amazement. "I give you my word that after I acquired Ray I spent every one of the long winter evenings crouched over the fire describing every one with such eloquence and accuracy that she could have walked straight up to Chatty in the street and said, 'Hello! You're Charity Ross, aren't you?'"

Chatty, thus evoked, gave a little bounce of irrepressible delight, her small round face suffused with friendliness and pleasure.

"Oh, Joel, how darling. Did you describe Tom, too?"

"Every blooming one of you. Hanna, I'm ashamed of you." Hanna made a small, propitiatory sound, smiling vaguely but radiantly. "However, you're forgiven. Beauty is its own excuse for being—uncommunicative, let's say. Mr. Dart, sir, at your service. Would you like them to step up one at a time?"

Neil Sheridan, busy with cocktail shaker and bottle, inquired plaintively, "You aren't pretending that you don't know Trudi and me, are you, Dart? Or Lindy Marsden and Doug King, if it comes to that?"

"No, no, I admit it freely. I also plead guilty to the knowledge that the house is called Lady Court, that it's forty miles from Washington over as bad roads as you'd find south of the North Pole, that this is the first time that you've had a house party in it for ten years, and that for some inscrutable reason you call yourselves the March Hares. Outside of that you are working on virgin soil, I assure you."

"Good Lord, Hanna, didn't you ever tell him even that? You *are* a miser. The four original March Hares called themselves that because they were mad and were born in March. I was the maddest," explained Joel modestly. "But Doug and Trudi and Jill weren't to be sneezed at. Jill's the little quiet one in the corner of the sofa that has her hat over her eyes so that you can't see how pretty she is. Hats off, Jill."

The girl in the corner took it off, smiling, and even in the darkening room you could see that she was very pretty indeed.

"Miss Jennifer Isabel Leighton, spinster," said Joel. "Well and favourably known as Jill. The guy sitting next to her——"

"Are all of your birthdays in March?" inquired Gavin Dart sceptically.

"No, no. Only the first four. Each of the founders could elect two more Hares and all that we had to guarantee about them was that they were mad. Of course Trudi cheated a little when she picked Hanna, but she was so ornamental that she didn't need to be useful."

"Twelve of you?" asked Hanna's husband. "And

Mrs. Hardy and I are intruders, so that leaves eleven. Who was the twelfth?" At the silence that fell abruptly over the gay voices he said quickly, "I'm sorry, that was stupid of me. Marsden, of course."

"Oh, no!" said Chatty swiftly and consolingly. "We hardly knew Fred Marsden—he'd only met Lindy a few weeks before they were married, and he sailed the week afterward, and got killed in the Argonne. It was one of those war marriages, you know."

The girl in the corner of the sofa who had taken off her hat said in a low voice:

"The twelfth was my sister Sylvia. She died quite a long time ago—nearly ten years."

Gavin Dart said very gently, "I'm so sorry. Please forgive my idiocy."

"There's nothing to forgive. . . . That tall red-headed one over there helping Sherry is Christopher Baird, better known as Kit. Take a bow, Kit!"

Kit took one, smiling swiftly over his shoulder.

"The one in the big chair that looks as though he were going to sleep is Chatty's husband, Tom Ross," continued Jill serenely, her hands locked so tight that no one could see the nervous tremor in them. "And the one nearest you in the tweed coat is Larry Redmond. That's all of us, Mr. Dart—no, Gavin's better, isn't it? And, Tom, if you're the candlemaker, I do think that you'd better wake up and tend to the lights. It really is getting blacker than Egypt."

"Want the real candlelight or the chandeliers?" inquired the candlemaker pleasantly, bestirring himself from the sofa.

"Candlelight—no, that takes too long. Here are the others, let's ask them. Lindy, which is it we want, romance or brilliance?"

"Brilliance," said Lindy from the doorway. "All those candles take much too long; we'll save them for dinner. Children, there's not even a twig! As soon as Sherry gives you stirrup cups, you'll have to do something about it."

"Gangway!" came Doug King's uproarious boom. "Here comes the ice, lads and lasses. Buckets of it—Doug with a big one and Trudi with a little one——"

"Ow!" Trudi's voice was raised in lamentations. "Drat you, Doug King, there goes half of mine and I nearly broke my neck over that stool, too. Why don't you look where I'm going? . . . What do you people think you're doing in here—playing train in a tunnel?"

"Steady on!" Tom's pleasant voice came from just behind her. "I forgot where the switch was for a minute. Don't cry, Trudi; everything's going to be all right. There, how about it?"

Abruptly the room was flooded with light, the two great chandeliers like frozen fountains glittered and sparkled with it, the room sparkled and glittered back.

Trudi, standing ruefully on one foot amid the fragments of ice, said mournfully, "If you'll just bay like a bloodhound, Uncle Tom, I think I can make it in two jumps. Nothing like an incentive!"

Uncle Tom bayed obligingly, Eliza once more triumphantly crossed the ice amid the plaudits of the multitude, and over the laughter rose the reassuring sound of more ice, jingling as merrily as sleighbells.

"When you think," said Joel reverently, "that all that you have to do with the nasty stuff is to freeze it to turn it practically into the staff of life, it's enough to restore your faith in geology or chemistry or human nature or something."

"Shut up, Joel!" Doug King swung a frosted glass

high, his face one vast, inclusive beam. "March Hares, here's to Us! A long life and a gay one——"

"I thought it was a short life," murmured Hanna, and thereat a mild insanity of mirth seized and held them.

"I love you, Hanna!" cried Trudi. "I hate people who know when they're funny. Sherry, give her another, because she's so beautiful, and doesn't know when she's funny."

And Sherry gave her another, and himself another, and Kit another, and while they're all laughing over that, you can get a better look at them. Now in the pure flood of crystal light you can see them quite clearly, and, really, they are rather worth looking at.

If Neil Sheridan, the one with the cocktail shaker and the platinum cigarette case, were in the movies, you would promptly and accurately cast him as the villain—so slim, so dapper, the possessor of such a sleek, dark moustache, such sleek, dark hair, and so sleek and dark a pair of eyes. His clothes are far too impeccable, his consumption of cigarettes far too rapid, and the glint of teeth beneath his slim moustache far too white, to bode any good—and yet those who know him best insist that he is a sheep in wolf's clothing, an amiable chap who is more than willing to do any fellow a good turn, and who is absurdly proud of the chic and hard-boiled Trudi. Twelve years ago he had come to Washington with Tom Ross, his roommate at law school, and they had both gone into the State Department together—and had left it together in 1917, to join the enterprising young law firm of Kountz & Maury (ex-Morowitz) of New York, which happened to be long on legal talent but short on social prestige. Sherry proved the little leaven that leavened the whole lump,

and for several years now his income has fluctuated agreeably between a hundred and a hundred and twenty-five thousand a year, earned principally on the golf links and tennis courts of Palm Beach and Southampton, while the indefatigable Semites have kept the home fires of legal talent burning in the Broadway offices of the firm. Sherry wears neckties as rich and glowing as the more dignified species of butterflies; he is thirty-eight, looks precisely as he did at twenty-eight, and at forty-eight will look even more so.

Just behind him, as arresting as an exclamation point in her slim black coat and infinitesimal hat, stands his lawful wedded wife Gertrude. Trudi is an amazing person—small, thin to the point of emaciation, brown as a gypsy, with hair and eyes the colour of her skin, and a mouth the colour of the red rag that waves at bulls; she has the face of an abnormally intelligent street urchin, the ease of manner of a grand duchess, and the absence of manners of a fishwife. Ten years ago she was the Cinderella of the Washington group—the daughter of a retired army colonel and the rather pathetic product of a procession of army posts reaching from Vermont to Honolulu. Nine years of affluence have metamorphosed her into the most redoutable bridge player in North America and one of the most perfect hostesses in the world. She never wears a jewel of any kind—her "windblown" bob takes thirty-five minutes to arrange if she is lucky—she has ankles and feet that would give Mistinguett a bad moment, and a careless husky voice that is oddly disturbing. Her clothes are absolutely simple; the morning ones come from Chanel, the afternoon ones from Lelong, and the evening ones from Vionnet, and they cost twenty-five thousand dollars a year no matter what Neil is making.

The roof-garden apartment on Park Avenue in which she lives for two months of the year and affectionately refers to as the Shanty contains a silk-quilted closet occupied by two hundred pairs of assorted footgear, most of them highly fantastic, and six severely plain little felt hats, in different shades of the same shape, which constitute her entire stock of millinery. It also boasts a pirate's chest which conceals three dozen varieties of liqueurs. Children, dogs, visiting potentates, and servants adore Trudi; all men like her and some women love her. She treats dowagers and infants with a grave and attentive friendliness that renders them her slaves; the rest of the world take what they can get of her and are thankful. No one knows her exact age—she never made any formal début in Washington, and occasionally observes that she must be somewhere between forty and fifty. What evidence there is points to the early thirties. She can look eighteen or forty-eight with equal facility. The Sheridans have no children.

Chatty Ross, curled up at one end of the long sofa with her small scuffed Oxfords tucked neatly under her, is a delightful person—small, gay, curly-headed, and irresponsible, in spite of the fact that she is the mother of four children and the only lady in the group who would be caught dead in the shabby gray coat that many rabbits died to consummate many years before. It is too long, too wide, far, far too worn, but it is Chatty's best coat, and above its flopping collar her eyes shine and her cheeks flush and dimple. There is not an atom of pretence in her entire make-up, and for all her dowdiness she is as hilarious as a small child over this miraculous party. She inhabits a six-room frame cottage in Hartsdale, has a coloured helper called

Bohemia, a three-year-old Dodge sedan, and a husband of whom she is just as proud as though he were the president of General Motors.

Tom Ross is not the president of General Motors—on the contrary. He is that least to be envied of all wage-earners, the struggling young lawyer who is no longer particularly young. Somewhere on the pleasant road that led so bravely out of Harvard, where he and Sheridan had roomed together, he took the wrong turning; perhaps it was the turn that led him away somewhat abruptly from the flourishing young firm of Kountz, Maury & Sheridan to the more hallowed portals of Hale & Dawes. Nine years have passed since they clanged to behind him, and Tom's curly brown hair has begun to retreat slightly from his temples, and his pleasant blue eyes are occasionally a somewhat bleak gray. Slim, tragically neat in order to counteract his decent shabbiness, he is as sensitive as his adored Chatty is oblivious, and there is something a little strained and fine-drawn about his smile. For more reasons than one this reunion is painful to him, but he has put his pride in his pocket and come in order to give her the only pleasure that she has begged for in eight years. Tom is thirty-six. There are days—yes, and nights—when he feels fifty-six, and pretty well tired of everything in the world except Chatty's small warm hands and delighted laughter.

At the other end of the sofa sits Hanna Dart, her magnificent black sables framing a dream of ivory and gold. Hanna is that rarest of creatures outside of books and the English aristocracy—a real beauty. She is not pretty, or lovely, or attractive, or charming; she is beautiful. With her silver gilt hair parted severely in the centre and coiled over her ears in two shining wheels,

her wide-set eyes, flawless and brilliant as aquamarines under dark and delicate brows, the lovely flow of colour coming and going beneath the satiny skin, the perfect curve of mouth and chin and shoulder—Hanna, daughter of our one-time ambassador to Spain, is divinely tall and most divinely fair. She is also as great a lady as it is possible for one not quite thirty to be—gentle-mannered, gentle-voiced, gentle-hearted. She has an amazing collection of diamonds, a golden-haired heir apparent of three, and practically no sense of humour. She wears nothing but black or white, in either of which she is totally devastating, and once in a long time she forgets to conceal her adoration of the quiet man seated at her elbow.

Gavin Dart is considerably older than the rest of the group—somewhere in his late forties or early fifties, with dark hair turning to steel, a pair of shrewd and ironic eyes, and a rather formidable mouth that is surprisingly unformidable when he smiles. He is a fairly tired business man, having amassed five million before fifty, but he is not too tired to find life diverting, his wife beautiful, and the coal industry absorbing. His home is in Pittsburg—his hobbies criminal law, cruises, and modern first editions; he has a nice wit when he cares to use it, immense self-possession, and is even better at listening than he is at talking. In spite of the fact that he is a victim of acute insomnia, his nerves are under such perfect control that, like Talleyrand, he would not start if you came up behind him in the dark and kicked him.

The young things seated on the farthest love-seat with their fingers openly and shamelessly linked are Rachel and Joel Hardy. It is difficult to think of the Hardys separately, as they never leave each other's

side for more than three minutes, unless forcibly handled, but if you inspect them closely it is quite easy to tell them apart. Of course they are both thin and dark as gypsies and both muffled in enormous tweed coats, but the one with the little scarlet felt hat cocked over one eye is Ray, and the one with the scarlet foulard tie is Joel. Ray is a highly diverting person, with a tilted nose, a small cloud of freckles, a wide, disarming grin, round hazel eyes, and hair so closely shorn that it looks like a little brown velvet cap. She is the only outsider in the group, with the exception of Gavin Dart, and she is almost ten years younger than its youngest member. She had met Joel in New York at her coming-out party nearly a year before, had fallen in love with him with a promptness and violence that astounded them both, and had pursued him shamelessly and relentlessly throughout her entire first season, at the end of which time he collapsed and married her. Their diversion in each other's society since then has been so flagrant and unflagging that it is occasionally embarrassing to the innocent bystander, but everyone who knows them delights in the Hardys. Under her impish exterior Rachel is the simplest of all the children of nature, mischievous as a monkey, superstitious as a sailor, an arrant little coward, and possessed of more curiosity than the Elephant's child himself. She believes in everything—ghosts, fairies, platonic friendship, undying love, the equality of man, the intuition of woman, the devotion of dogs, fortune tellers, and four-leaf clovers. She is lost and undone without Joel, and makes no bones whatever about it.

Joel is a dark and dreamy-eyed young man with a misleadingly poetic expression which conceals an infantile fondness for nonsense in any form and a passion

for detective stories. He also knows the words and music of every song composed in America since the *Mayflower* landed, and is anxious that you should know them, too. Many is the time that he and Kit Baird have sung the sun down and the moon up, and just at present he is feeling slightly morose because Ray has left his cherished accordion at home.

During the year in which he dallied with the State Department and a diplomatic career he was the most sought-after dinner partner in a radius of thirty miles of Washington, and he has lost none of his insinuating and effortless charm. He spent 1917 and 1918 driving an ambulance in France. During the first year he was known to his adoring comrades as Hell Bent Hardy and during the second as Careful Joe, the somewhat abrupt transition being accounted for by the intrusion into his life of a bomb that made a neat part down the centre of his hair, and missed the end of his nose by a scanty quarter of an inch. The Hardys have a fairly comfortable income inherited from a worshipping grand-aunt of Joel's. They inhabit a delightful and uncomfortable old farmhouse just outside of Greenwich, which they have remodelled very badly indeed; they have as obvious assets an elderly French couple, a large English sheep dog, a small black kitten, and a perfectly magnificent time. It would be difficult to discover anyone nicer anywhere.

Seated on the far corner of the great couch in front of the fire, her hands still linked about the little fur cap on her knee, her bare head bright, sits Jill Leighton, the sister of that Sylvia who had been the twelfth of this group and had died so many years ago. Jill is one of those lucky people who wear charm and distinction as obviously printed on their faces as visas on the passport

to good fortune. A plumber would know in the space that it took to draw a breath that here, slight and serene, sat a lady—a grand duke would know it, too. There is something engagingly young and untouched about her, in spite of the highly sophisticated atmosphere in which she has lived for nearly thirty years; her mother, who is invariably referred to even at fifty-three as the "Beautiful Mrs. Leighton," is known from London to Budapest for her clothes and her complexion, and Jill has followed loyally in her radiant wake. The beautiful Mrs. Leighton prefers an international atmosphere, and three years in pre-war Washington have been her only experiment on her native heath in more years than she cares to remember. Even in Washington her acute ears caught occasional horrified echoes from the Boston that she had left outraged and gasping twenty years before, and she feels more securely comfortable in her lacquered jewel box of an apartment, in the Avenue Henri Martin, where Jill has installed her before returning for the first time since the war for a long visit to Lindy Marsden. Jill sits quite still, her eyes on her linked hands, so that it is impossible to see whether their larkspur blue is unshadowed, but at any rate she holds her fine small head with its wreath of tawny gold hair lightly and smilingly erect—a gracious and graceful little figure silhouetted sharply against the soft fur lining of the coat that she has flung open.

Lindy Marsden is seated a handbreadth from her, small, velvet-eyed, and velvet-voiced, as dark as Jill is fair, and most lovely to look at with her warm white skin and shadowy lashes. Lindy, with her exquisite voice, her exquisite manners, and her exquisite hands, is very Southern and very feminine; she is also a romanticist, flagrant and unashamed. Byron is still

her hero, as he was her grandmother's. The nice boy that she married on a frantic impulse that bitter January morning ten years ago has left her enough money to gratify every whim, and Lindy has whims enough. A little house in New York, a great house in Georgetown, a garden and a balcony in Fontainebleau—Lindy trails through them all her pansy-coloured velvets and flower-coloured chiffons, with lace falling softly about her wrists and jewels swinging softly at her ears. Her shadowed eyes are forever seeking—and finding—candlelight and starlight, and fires dancing discreetly on open hearths; Strauss waltzes and little dinners in leafy corners of the Bois; interminable talks over empty liqueur glasses with gentlemen who are civilized enough to be deftly and urbanely romantic; low lights, low voices, music over starlit waters, the dying fall of songs, and the drifting perfume of wallflowers in the sunlight and jasmine in the moonlight. She fits as perfectly into the great shadowy room as did the dark-eyed girl for whom it was built, dead and gone a hundred years before; it is from her that she has inherited other treasures, too—the slim lovely hands, the delicate and elusive smile, and the languid grace as sure and unpremeditated as a flower's.

She is bestowing the smile now on the red-headed young man who is seated beside her on the arm of the couch. Kit Baird is the handsomest man in the room, thoroughly well aware of the fact, and most contemptuously indifferent to it. Well over six feet tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, and long-fingered, he is the ungrateful possessor of eyes so darkly blue that you might mistake them for black, hair so darkly red that you might mistake it for copper, eyelashes long enough for a movie actress, close-set ears peaked like a fawn's,

and a fine arrogant mouth that he has learned to keep fast closed whenever it pleases him—which is frequently. He is also the possessor of a breath-taking smile, and a voice so misleadingly caressing that it has been his undoing on more than one occasion.

None of the people in the room know a great deal about him—his age, lineage, past life, present occupation and future intentions are his own secret. He drifted in to Joel Hardy in the State Department a year or so before the war with an infectiously enthusiastic letter of introduction from Joel's roommate at Yale, who had been sharing a peculiarly boring revolution with him in Venezuela, and who urged vehemently that Joel should induce Mr. Baird into the consular service —Mr. Baird's principal qualifications for such a post appearing to be red hair, a smattering of French, Spanish, and German, a thorough mastery of the guitar, a charming, melancholy tenor voice, and an unrivalled collection of ribald cowboy laments, railway rounds, Kentucky mountain ballads, and Mexican folk songs. The letter also enthusiastically dwelt on an apparently unlimited capacity to consume rum and go without sleep, and a fine disregard for life, limb, and reputation that had come close to landing its possessor in jail or eternity on more than one occasion.

Joel, properly impressed and immensely intrigued by the cool and casual young man, promptly manœuvred him into an obscure position in his office and a more prominent one in the apartment that he and Larry Redmond shared together in Wyoming Avenue. The fact that Kit Baird could dance better than any man in Washington proved an open sesame from then until the day that the declaration of war saw him enlisted in the Marine Corps. For a year he lingered on at Quantico, a

fever of restless unease burning behind the mocking, indifferent eyes, then the war swept him off, too, and the March Hares had seen him no more. Only a week ago he had run into Trudi Sheridan in a night club in New York, and now once more he is sitting in the old charmed circle, as carelessly at ease as though it had been ten minutes instead of ten years since he had last flung a possessive arm across the back of the old sofa and smiled down over a frosted rim into Lindy Marsden's lifted eyes.

The two remaining men standing within convenient reach of Sherry's hospitable ministrations are Larry Redmond and Doug King.

Larry is an agreeable-looking young man, tall and lean and brown, with a good hard jaw, a good straight eye, and hair that you might call bronze if you were romantically inclined and brown if you weren't. He is the president of a small, solid, conservative bank in Boston; at the time that this honour descended on him, as a matter of fact, he was the youngest bank president in the United States. He is a man's man, and therefore women like him, and children, too, and dogs—all the traditional attributes are his. In the war he proved more daring and resourceful than even his best friends prophesied; he could not have done better if he had been a black sheep, and he emerged from it, somewhat to his discomfort, with a neat collection of honours and decorations, which he has not laid eyes on from that day to this. In the old days before that almost forgotten war he was rumoured engaged to Jill Leighton, but rumour was apparently as inaccurate as usual, since they have not seen each other since he sailed for France, and he has scarcely glanced in her direction since they entered the room. His warm, friendly smile is at present

resting on Doug King, who is holding forth hilariously over his second cocktail.

In more homely circles King would undoubtedly be known as the Life of the Party. Tall, genial, and blondly handsome, he is so richly endowed with animal spirits and a carefree and infectious laugh that his enthusiasm winds up by being extremely contagious. He is the original founder and moving spirit of the March Hares, and there is undoubtedly no better raconteur within a hundred miles of any place where he stands. If there is about him the barest hint of the jovial travelling salesman with his "Stop me if you've heard this one," no one ever really stops Doug; there is too promising a twinkle in his blue eyes, too hospitable a use of the flask of really excellent Bourbon that invariably occupies his hip pocket, too lavish a distribution of the fat dark Coronas that live snugly in the fine straw case in his right-hand vest pocket or the aristocratic Russian cigarettes that dwell in the slim gold case in the left. His sheer linen handkerchiefs are adorned with huge, intricate monograms, his boots are made in England and his ties in France; he calls every head-waiter in every night club in New York by his right first name and they reward him by a special smile and a special table; his excellent tweed suits bear with them a faint aroma of good tobacco, Russian leather, and fern and heather in the sunshine—a breath from the moors that seems indigenous to them, even if it does cost him thirty dollars an ounce in small, severely plain crystal flasks. Doug King is interested in real estate; he has been interested in it ever since he invaded Washington from Panama twelve years before with a grandiose project in which he optimistically hoped to interest an unduly phlegmatic government. Failing signally in that, he

joined forces with an enterprising young real estate firm and devoted himself for two years to that and the more congenial task of leading the March Hares in concentrating on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The war proved not too rude an interruption to him as the adaptable and assiduous aide of a very prominent general, and at its conclusion he made his headquarters in New York, where he flourished sufficiently to open branches in Palm Beach and Southampton. He has seen something from time to time of Lindy and the Sheridans —they frequent the same ambulatory set that nominally constitutes New York society, and that actually spends four or five weeks of the year there, and then forms itself into a gay caravan that dances its way from Palm Beach to Pinehurst, from Pinehurst to Paris, from Paris to Southampton, from Southampton to Aiken, from Aiken to Havana, from Havana to Palm Beach and around again, only stopping long enough to try out a new step on the Lido or an old step in London. Lindy is too lazy and too fastidious to keep up with it continuously; she drops out for long weeks of dreaming before the great fires of her Georgetown house or under the horse-chestnuts of her little walled garden in Fontainebleau, but Trudi, Sherry, and Doug never get out of step for longer than it takes to powder a nose or snatch a highball.

Just at present, Doug is apparently in an even higher state of elation than usual. As far as he is concerned, this is obviously the beginning of a simply top-hole, bang-up, A-1 party, and already he is pawing the air like an old war horse who sniffs powder freshening on the breeze. His voice booms exultantly and there is a jubilantly irrepressible swagger to his walk—metaphorically, his cordial arm is about every man's shoulder and

every lady's waist. It is difficult to refrain from bursting into "For he's a jolly good fellow" at the mere sight of so genial a glow.

"This is the life, children—hey, hey!—this indubitably is the life! Here's where we make every party that we ever had before seem like a rehearsal for this one. How come the gorgeous inspiration, Lindy?"

"Thank Trudi. She ran into Kit at a delightful little haunt of hers called the Silver Stallion last week, and wrote me that she thought we ought to celebrate the prodigal's return properly. So here we are!"

"I'll say we are! We're here because we're here because we're here because WE'RE HERE! One more round, Sherry, because we're here. . . ."

"Did you come down here often?" inquired Ray over the jubilant clamour. "All of you, I mean? It must seem too wonderful to be back."

"Oh, it does!" cried Chatty Ross exultantly. "We came down dozens of times, didn't we, Lindy? In 1916 and '17 we did it over every holiday, and even in 1918 the men came up from Quantico and Mead and Fort Myers for over New Year's——"

"That was the last party," said Lindy, sipping the golden liquid as fastidiously as though it were Château Yquem. "No one's been in it since then but Sam—he lights the fires now and then during the winter to keep the whole thing from moulding away. Sherry, this *is* good."

"Don't you ever come down yourself?" inquired Gavin Dart. "It's just a little better than good, Sheridan. I'll dispose of any of the remaining dregs."

"No, not ever." She put down her glass softly. "Of course, the house has been in the family nearly two hundred years, but it's been fifty since any of us have

really lived in it. Too far from either Washington or Richmond, you see. And the roads really are nightmares!"

"You flatter them," remarked Kit Baird drily. "Those last six miles made the river beds that I used to ride in France in the dark seem like the Lincoln Highway. That motor bike of mine was crying like a child all that last stretch from the creek."

"Did you go in for despatch riding in France, too?" asked Ray. "I thought Joel said Poland——"

"I said he broke his leg in Poland, Ray," added Joel mildly. "Never does listen to more than one word out of every three that I say. Sometimes it's the right one and sometimes it isn't."

"Do you know he says that you're the only one that he wrote to in ten years, Joel?"

"Well, I wasn't what you'd call stupefied with pride by the letter!" Joel grinned reminiscently from the settee. "My dear old pal, whom I so touchingly parted from in 1918, took his pencil in hand in 1921 and wrote me sixteen words informing me that he and his leg were broke as hell in Warsaw, and inviting me to sell three hundred shares of oil stock that he'd left with me. That's the last I heard of ole Massa Baird for seven years and three months. He's a swell correspondent!"

"You've got to take into consideration that a really first-class postage stamp from Poland cost a good round nickel," remarked Kit, reaching over to give the cocktail shaker a dispirited rattle. "Good Lord, Sherry, you might as well try to get blood out of a stone—or is it sermons you get out of stones?"

"Have you been in Poland ever since, Kit?"

"No, lady, giving you a civil answer to a civil question, I have not been in Poland ever since."

Lindy, looking diverted with her mouth and apprehensive with her eyes, continued dauntlessly: "Well, then, where have you been?"

"Ah, where haven't I? If you've got an atlas around I'll show you a place in Peru that I didn't come within two hundred miles of, and there was another one near Patras and a mining camp somewhere in Nevada. Outside of those, I think that I can truthfully say that I've hit them all. Quite a gypsy in my quiet way."

"And that," said Joel Hardy admiringly, "is about all the information you're going to get out of young Mr. Baird during your lifetime, my child."

"Hey!" interrupted Trudi vigorously from the depths of her winged chair. "Will you all pipe down long enough to find out what in heck is being done about this fire?"

"Trudi," said Joel solemnly, "I swear to goodness I thought you'd gone away somewhere and frozen up hard. I was just going to send out the Saint Bernard dogs. You aren't telling us that you've been sitting there all this time without a squeak out of you, are you?"

"I've been drinking," explained Trudi. "I don't mind much who talks while I'm drinking—it makes me feel large and generous and tolerant—you know. 'They say—what say they? Let them say.' That kind of stuff. But if anyone says anything more for the next five minutes except to answer my questions, it'll be because I've lost my strength."

"Shake you up a few more, my poppet?" shouted Doug King genially.

"No. Two's enough for any girl that knows her mind

—or maybe it's three. You know, Lindy, I still get so blankety blank *tired* when I don't talk that I get pains behind my ears—sharp shooting ones—right through here." She indicated the precise location with a lustrously manicured finger tip, and added complacently, "If you ask me, I think it's darned dangerous."

Hanna Dart stirred in the corner of the sofa, smiled her ineffable smile, and extended the still brimming glass that she had politely accepted when it was proffered her and even more politely touched with her lips.

"Here, Gavin, give her this, it's too delicious. If only I wasn't on this stupid regime——"

"Same stupid regime you've been on since you were sixteen, isn't it?" inquired Trudi over the edge of the glass. "No smoking, no drinking, no swearing, bed at ten and breakfast at eight—regime of being a good little girl, eh what?"

"Oh, Trudi, you do make it sound loathsome!"

"You're sweet, Hanna. I think Gavin's rather sweet, too, not to change you a bit. Of course, you may not have all those interesting lines in your face that make some of us such fascinating studies, but neither do you have to sit up till three in the morning trying to decide if orange blossom anti-wrinkle cream would do you more good if you ate it. I suppose if I asked you how you got that skin of yours you'd tell me that you used a little bit of castile soap and a good rough wash rag?"

Hanna, the frosted silk of her skin flushed a transparent rose, murmured incredulously, "Oh, Trudi, how did you know? But I think it does have some kind of oil in it, too, and——"

The flush deepened at the shout of laughter that drowned her out, but she continued to smile, remarking mildly as it subsided:

"I think that you'd all be rather horrid if you weren't so nice. Gavin, if we aren't going to get ready for dinner yet, I think I'll take my cloak again. It is a little cold."

Trudi, swinging lightly off the edge of the table on which she had perched, commented blithely, "A little cold! It's cold enough to freeze hell over. Personally, I'm in a fine glow, but I can tell from just one look at my fingers that they're frost-bitten to two inches below the knuckles. Are you brave lads going to do anything about hauling in the Yule log, or do you think it's more fun standing around and rattling an empty cocktail shaker?"

"How about it, boys? Shall we give these little hothouse flowers a great big fire for an All Hallowe'en present?"

Doug's ruddy countenance beamed invitingly on the somewhat less responsive visages of his comrades, who under his insistent glow reluctantly relinquished glasses, and shrugged themselves into abandoned coats and mufflers with anticipatory groans.

"If you gals think it's cold in here," said Joel Hardy, "I'd thank you to incline an ear to that wind that's been yowling for the last five minutes around the north corner of this house. I don't want to intrude my personal troubles on any of you gay madcaps—still, it wasn't ten years ago that a fairly crack doctor told me that the best thing for me to do was to find a nice warm dry climate and stick to it. A darned eminent guy he was, too, with little orange cat whiskers and a very intelligent pair of pop eyes. Nice and dry and warm—his very words." He placed one hand on his chest and gave two expertly hollow coughs before he was interrupted by a heartless thump between his shoulder blades from the jovial leader of the enterprise.

"Can't cough yourself out of this, young feller. All set? On your mark!"

"I'll come, too," suggested Ray promptly. "I'm a perfectly elegant wood carrier."

"Darling, you are *the* most sickening little tagger," said Joel adoringly. "Of course, it's nice of you to prefer ten minutes in a coal-room with me to ten years in a bar-room with some less fortunate fellow—still, this is probably as good a time as any to call your attention to the fact that woman's place is in the home. We're probably going to mean all the more to each other after this harrowing separation, too——"

"God, I hope not," commented Trudi despairingly. "If you two keep on moping and mowing at each other much longer I'll pick out the nearest corner and dash my brains out against the wall. Doug, for the love of Labrador close that door before we all get blown up the chimney!"

"The quickest way is down through the cedars behind the little graveyard," called Lindy after the retreating figures. "Do hurry, it really is dreadful in here!"

"Through the cedars behind the little graveyard?" repeated Ray in an awe-stricken undertone. "I shall die before I get out of this place. And Joel without a rabbit's foot to his name. A graveyard! What in heaven's name do you do with a graveyard?"

"The usual thing," said Lindy gently. "Though there haven't been any Pallisers buried there for close on a hundred years. Girls, how about getting some of these bags and hampers straightened out? We can put them at the foot of the stairs for the men to carry up; it really is getting late."

Trudi, staggering under a brief case, a blanket roll, and something that looked like the offspring of a ward-

robe trunk and a jewel case, remarked sepulchrally over her shoulder, in the direction of the pallid Ray:

"Girl, you ain't heard nuffin'. Wait till Lindy tells you about the old boy who inaugurated the graveyard."

"Wh-what happened to him?"

"Trudi, you're spoiling everything. It's despicable to tell a murder story with the lights on."

"Murder?" echoed Ray hollowly. "Here? You're making up."

Trudi, halfway to the hall, uttered a sinister laugh.

"Ha! Wait a bit, that's all I say, wait a bit. In the meantime you might give us a hand before you pass into a decline. Thanks a lot—ouf! Shall we start setting the tables, Lindy? Are we going to eat in here?"

"Yes, card tables in front of the fire, don't you say? Just picnic to-night, I thought, because it's so late. Most of the things to eat are in those hampers, and I suppose the silver and china are still in the lacquer cabinet—no, the right-hand one. Now where in the world did we leave those card tables?"

"I remember!" cried Chatty triumphantly. "In the closet, back of the love-seat. Kit and I folded them up the very last thing. Is it locked, Lindy?"

"Heavens, no, nothing's locked. It may stick a little, though; just give it a hard push."

The hard push precipitated the energetic Chatty somewhat abruptly into the already crowded closet, but her voice rose triumphantly from its depths.

"Oh, there's everything! The tables, and the phonograph and the floor cushions—and Kit's Spanish guitar and the ping-pong rackets—and that terrible old cap of Sherry's and both the targets. Jill, come and help—I can't wiggle these tables out all alone."

Jill, who had been sitting motionless in the far corner of the sofa, slipped readily to her feet and the rescue.

"Twist them sideways. Never mind the hampers now, Trudi—let's get these set up. Look *out*, Chatty—there goes the phonograph!"

"D'you think it's broken anything?" inquired Chatty, placing it gently on a stand, all contrite solicitude. "Oh, look, it's still got a record on it. Now why in the world that didn't smash! Look, it winds all right . . . and it plays all right, too, thank Heaven! Listen to that—does it make you feel a hundred and fifty-two or doesn't it? 'Underneath the Stars' . . . I wonder how many hundred miles we've danced to that?"

Jill, her face bent over the recalcitrant catches of the card table, pushed it abruptly from her and crossed the room toward the hall, saying without turning her head:

"Which room am I having, Lindy? There's something I was to get."

"Journey's End, darling. Need any help?"

"Thanks, no. I won't be a minute."

Chatty, following the progress of the slight figure across the hall with stricken eyes, murmured:

"Oh, Lindy, I'm so frightfully sorry. Honestly and truly I forgot—honestly I did."

"Of course you did, darling. Never mind; just go on with the tables. She'll be back in a minute."

Chatty made a panic-stricken gesture in the direction of the little whirling disk that, oblivious of time and memory, was spinning out its old tale of magic and romance and stars on a summer night.

"Underneath the stars," sang the violins, forever young and unwearied, "underneath the silver——"

"Don't turn it off, you little dumb-bell," adjured

Trudi, flinging a consoling arm about the culprit's shoulders. "It'll make her much more comfortable if we pretend not to notice anything. Just forget it—after all, ten years is ten years."

"I'd like awfully to be tactful and discreet and dignified," remarked young Mrs. Hardy wistfully from the pile of floor cushions that she was distributing in a semi-circle. "I know it's none of my business, and that I ought to keep my mouth shut and my nose out of it, and that I haven't any finer feelings, but I'll lie right down here and die if somebody doesn't tell me what it is we're to pretend not to notice, and to forget because ten years is ten years."

Lindy Marsden, her arms full of silver and china, said gently:

"We really are dreadfully rude; but I do think it's rather a compliment, because it means that we can't remember that you don't know as much about us as we know ourselves. It isn't half as mysterious as it sounds. 'Underneath the Stars' was Sunny's favourite tune, that's all—she put it on the phonograph herself on the last party that we were out here."

"I remember," said Hanna. "I remember perfectly. It was out in the hall—she and Doug were dancing together, and Kit came out and cut it off—and Doug pretended to be furious. It must have gone on right from where it stopped then—Jill must have remembered, too, poor child. It *is* rather dreadful, you know. . . . There, thank Heaven, it's stopping."

"Sunny?" repeated Ray, her eyes still bright with unanswered questions. "Oh, that was Jill Leighton's sister Sylvia, wasn't it? The one that died?"

"The one that died. Hanna, if you'll fix the china, I'll tend to the glasses. We can use that long table

against the wall as a sort of buffet, and just stack the plates and the silver on it."

"Well, but how did she die?" inquired Ray humbly but firmly. "She was awfully young, wasn't she?'

"Nineteen," said Lindy. "My age. She was my roommate at school, you know. She was drowned."

"Drowned? Here—in Washington?"

"The Elephant's child has nothing on you when it comes to 'satiable curiosity, has he?" remarked Trudi, grimly diverted. "Let's just suspend all this nonsense about table setting till the little stranger in our midst catches up with us, shan't we? Fire ahead, Rachel—only I'd like to know first why the informative Joel didn't keep you posted on the subject?"

"I can't imagine," said Ray solemnly. "I can't remember his ever talking about her at all, except to say that she'd died."

"I hope your questions aren't going to be as foolish as mine," remarked Trudi amiably. "Just for the moment it had slipped what passes for my mind that Joel was as cuckoo about her as any man I know, saving your presence. Of course it did take Sherry about a year after she died to realize that I was even alive, but it may have taken Joel longer."

"Probably that's the reason he couldn't even abide me at first," said Ray reflectively. "The first three times I asked him to marry me he simply laughed in my face; for quite a while it upset me a good deal, but if she was as fascinating as that, you certainly can't blame him for being somewhat unimpressed by me."

"You're a disarming little beggar, aren't you?" inquired Trudi somewhat rhetorically. "I can already feel you worming your way into our affections. As one purist to another, however, I don't believe that fascinat-

ing was the right word for Sunny—it sounds too darned deliberate. Would you call primroses fascinating?"

"Was Sunny like primroses?"

"She had hair like primroses—that soft, pale yellow—and she was little, too, and sweeter than spring. You see, if she could make me talk like this what she must have done to Joel and Sherry and Doug and Kit and every man that ever laid eyes on her."

Hanna Dart said gently and sadly, "We could tell you about her for a hundred years, Rachel, and not make you see her. No one ever danced like Sunny; no one ever laughed like her or sang like her. When she and Kit waltzed together, everyone in the room used to stop to watch them, and when she laughed it was simply too lovely to be true."

Ray, a little shiver in her voice, asked desolately, "And she was drowned when she was only nineteen?"

It seemed suddenly strange to be alive with all that loveliness dead.

"She drowned herself when she was nineteen," said Trudi, her face abruptly grim and tired.

"Oh, Trudi, no one ever really knew!" murmured Hanna. "She might have fallen—there's an awfully sharp drop just below the falls, isn't there, Lindy?"

Lindy, her face turned to the shadows, said in a voice so low that it was almost lost, "Yes."

"I thought that you had all grown up by now," commented Trudi, ruthless and scornful. "Lindy, do you think she stepped off that nice sharp drop?"

"No," said the small lost voice.

"There's enough mystery about her death without adding to it," commented Trudi trenchantly. "Certainly everyone knows that she had some dreadful shock two or three days before—before it happened. I

saw her the night before Hanna's party . . . she was like a child caught in a nightmare; something had happened that made her realize that the human race wasn't precisely the superb affair that she believed it to be. And Sunny wouldn't have known what to do in a rotten world, so she slipped out of it and left it to the rest of us."

"Was she Jill's younger sister?" inquired Ray, her voice still desolate. It would have been a pleasanter world with Sunny in it.

"She was a year younger, but she wasn't her sister, as a matter of fact. Half-sister, though hardly anyone knew it then. Jill idolized her, and I suppose that none of them wanted the ravishing Mrs. Leighton's past affairs explored more than necessary."

"I think that a lot of that may have been very unfair gossip," murmured Hanna, her lovely, tranquil eyes vaguely concerned.

"Gossip my eye! It wasn't gossip that Jill's real name was Cavendish, and that Mrs. Cavendish ran off to South America with an Englishman called Leighton with Jill tucked under her arm when the wretched mite was six months old, was it? It wasn't gossip that young Cavendish blew out his brains and left her free to marry Leighton, was it? It wasn't gossip that Leighton was killed in a railroad accident, that when Cavendish's old father died, he left every cent of his fortune to Jill, and that Sunny and Mrs. Leighton were as dependent on Jill as though they were paupers? That wasn't gossip, was it?"

"No," said Lindy from the shadows. "That wasn't gossip."

"But I'll wager that everyone in Washington but Lindy thought that Sunny was Jill's own sister till they

dug all this up at the inquest. I know that I did, and I," confessed Mrs. Sheridan, "am not one of those little Japanese monkeys that speak no evil, hear no evil, and see no evil. If any gossip is flying around I'm crouched right in the vicinity, all ready to sink my teeth in it and worry it like a bone! Now, if it's all right with you, Ray, and seeing as how this is supposed to be a bright, giddy, hilarious reunion, suppose we pass lightly on to another topic? Such as what in Hades is keeping those brave lads out there with their treasure trove, and how cold you have to get before you lose all sensation and the robins begin to cover you up?"

"I see them!" announced Chatty triumphantly, her snub nose pressed against the window pane. "They're just coming around the corner—mercy, they've brought the wood pile with them! They have to go slowly, because they're absolutely doubled up with the wind; it's blowing a gale, honestly! Listen, they're singing."

Faint and far off came the lusty chorus, and Trudi cocked an attentive ear.

"When I walks dat levee round, round, round, round," she hummed deeply and reminiscently. "When I walks dat levee round, round, round, round . . ."

Her brief skirts swung free and wide as her swaggering strut circled wider—wider. The chorus outside was almost on her heels.

> "'When I walks dat levee ROUND,
> I'm lookin' for a bully
> And dat bully mus' be found!'"

They were in the room, with the wind at their heels, stamping mightily in her circling wake, drowning out her lighter voice, prancing, exultant, crimson-faced, the frosty air still in their eyes.

"'When I walks dat levee round, round, round, round . . .'"

"Come along, girls—step lively there, Ray—everybody in, high, wide, and fancy does it——"

"'When I walks dat levee round . . .'"

Ray lifted her voice valiantly, stamping and shouting with the best of them, carolling lustily in the wake of these hilarious children, whose lifted voices drowned the wind, whose arms were full of the logs that meant warmth and light, whose laughter swept about her, scattering the shadows before it.

"'I'm looking for a bully and dat bully can't be found! . . .'"

"Jill Leighton, whatever in the world—here, give her a hand, Doug! What in the *world* is it?"

"It's the tub—for the apples!" Jill was as rosy and breathless as any of them. "I found it in the closet under the stairs—all the Hallowe'en things are there;the flour for the ring, and the mirror and the candles, and two old jack-o'-lanterns and driftwood for the fire. Lindy, it's going to take simply buckets to fill this thing."

"Well, let's stick it over there now and get at the fire, shan't we? We aren't going to bob before supper. It isn't really properly dark yet."

"Oh, Kit," cried Chatty exultantly, "I found your guitar; it still has the red ribbons on it—look! Let's have one song before we get ready for supper. Lindy—Lindy, can't we?"

"Oh, let's have two; that's an inspiration. Want matches, Kit?"

The fire builder, from his knees on the hearth, shook his head.

"Thanks, I'm amply provided with everything, ap-

parently, including a guitar. There, is that the best fire since the little affair in Chicago, or isn't it?"

"It is, it is! Quick, someone, turn out the lights. Cushions, everyone! Kit?"

In the friendly darkness a voice at Jill Leighton's elbow asked quietly:

"Another cushion, Jill?"

She turned her face in the direction from which it came, saying in a voice so low that it was barely audible:

"No." After a long moment she spoke again, lower still. "Larry, if I had known that you were going to be here, I should never have come."

The man said quietly, "I know. That's why I told Lindy that I wasn't coming."

Across the room someone called impatiently, 'Got the guitar, Kit?"

The guitar itself answered, a small, silvery plaint at the touch of fingers long forgotten.

"Gosh, that's terrible! Hold everything while I have another go at it. How's that, Joel?"

"Ah!" fretted the guitar softly. "Ah! Ah-h!"

"Filthy," pronounced Joel judicially. "Worse than that. Don't pay any attention to it—it sounds to me as though it were doing it on purpose. Let's have 'The Policeman's Child.'"

"No, I want 'The Drunkard's Remorse'!"

The fire, leaping, soaring, dancing in the great chimney, lit up the ring of faces, flushed with warmth, with laughter—with memory, suddenly joyous.

"Oh, Kit, the one about the Jack of Diamonds."

"All in good time," said the red-headed young man. "In good time, if and when you behave yourselves. In the meantime, peace and be still. Want your song, Lindy?"

"Yes, please," said a shadowy voice from the shadows.

"All right—catch!" He leaned his head against the corner of the mantel and lifted his voice—a voice as effortless, as careless, as haunting as the tune, drifting up across the years and the mountains to ring once more through Lindy's room.

"'Down in the valley,
The valley below—
Lean your head over,
Hear the wind blow.'"

From what far hills did it come, the little song? What far-off girl had bent her head at its behest?

"'Hear the wind blow, dear,
Hear the wind blow—
Lean your head over,
Hear the wind blow.'"

Against the coolness of the marble his hair burned like bright coals—his eyes like dark ones.

"'If you don't love me,
Love whom you please,
Put your arms 'round me
Give my heart ease—

"'Put your arms 'round me
Ere it's too late—
Put your arms 'round me—
Feel my heart break.'"

Feel it break, feel it break, sang the guitar, all the forlorn gallantry in the world turning its silvery mockery to tears.

"'Roses love sunshine,'" sang Kit Baird, his eyes on those far-off hills,

"'Violets love dew,
Angels in Heaven
Knows I love you!

"'Knows I love you, dear,
Knows I love you—
Angels in Heaven
Knows—I—love—you. . . .'"

It drifted off as lightly and aimlessly as it had come, leaving not even an echo behind it in the great room, but in the leaping circle of the flames no other voice was lifted, no finger stirred, as though those who listened were loath to have it go. It was the singer who broke the spell.

"That's that!" he said briefly, swinging to his feet. "The rest will keep till after supper; they've kept ten years. Are we dressing. Lindy?"

"Of *course* we're dressing," said Trudi sternly. "How is anyone going to know what perfectly divine clothes we've got if we don't dress? The March Hares never go native, and I've got a lacquer-red brocade dinner dress in that bag that is calculated to make strong men shriek and clutch at their hearts."

"Me, too!" concurred Chatty blithely. "Only mine are going to shriek with horror and surprise. Outside of the fact that mine isn't red and isn't brocade, and that it looks more like a bungalow apron than a dinner dress it's a perfectly lovely little affair. I can't wait to get into it!"

If she had turned her curly head an inch she would have encountered something in the tense whiteness of

Tom's face that would have given her pause; but it was Trudi who turned—and then averted her eyes quickly as though she had cheated.

"Oh, you've got curly hair," she replied, swiftly careless. "If I had curly hair I'd slip into the eldest child's rompers, tie a blue sash around my tummy, and let it go at that. Your nose turns up, too. Some people in this vale of tears have all the luck! Come on, Sheridan, if someone doesn't get started we'll all be drifting back in time for a nice late breakfast. Where do we go, Lindy?"

"East India room. You have the Half Moon, Doug. Joel and Ray in the Cubby Hole and the Darts in Seventh Heaven. Kit, you and Larry have the Ghost's Walk, next to me, because I don't dare put anyone else in it. That's all of us, isn't it?"

"Oh, Lindy, are you taking the Priest's room?" Chatty's guileless voice lifted in amazement. "That's always been Jill's and——"

"I know—I'm being selfish." Lindy's soft serenity bridged the stricken pause. "I've always coveted it, and I'm too old now to be a perfect hostess. Jill has Journey's End. Help me with this bag, will you, Doug? Coming, Kit?"

"As soon as I get this built up. My professional pride isn't satisfied; by the time you sybarites get back you'll be needing ice-packs and palm-leaf fans." He knelt on the hearth, flinging a last gibe over his shoulder into the jubilant tumult that was dissolving itself into a confusion of racing footsteps, slamming doors, and receding clamour.

"Hey, Larry, put some salt on the ghost's tail and keep him for me, will you?"

From the distance came an answering shout, a final burst of laughter, the echo of the last door . . . silence.

The man on the hearth bent forward, his hands as light and skilful as though it were a heart that he was teaching to flame into gayety and beauty instead of a fire. Deep as he was in his task, at the light step behind him he lifted his head and turned to flash the girl in the shadows that unforgotten smile. And as of old she stopped to greet it, hand against her heart, suddenly and startlingly pale.

He asked easily, "Forgotten something, little Lindy?"

Lindy, steadying herself against the end of the couch, replied as easily in her velvety little voice, "Yes, gloves and a purse. Seen them anywhere?"

"Not yet." He was on his feet in one swift move. "Here, let's have some light and we'll institute a search party."

But at that she lifted her hand. "No, no, the fire's light enough. I think I left them over by the window."

Kit, leaning against the mantel, asked in that mocking tone that was still a caress, "D'you put them on when you fix your hair? Or did you want to buy something before dinner?"

Even that did not colour the small face. She said tranquilly, "It has my powder. Kit, look, that's a strange sky, isn't it? What does it mean?"

"Trouble," he said, not stirring. "Storm. There's been a wind rising ever since we got here."

"That's why it got so inky dark a little while ago, isn't it? See, that jagged streak behind the cedars is as red as fire."

"Oh, redder; red as blood." And as the slim hand on the dim brocade tightened, he laughed. "Still hate blood, Lindy?"

"Oh, it's worse than hating. I can't stand it. That sounds idiotic, but it's really an understatement! Some-

thing in me dies a little every time I even hear the word."

"Remember the time I cut my wrist in Rock Creek?"

"Yes," said Lindy, her eyes still on the strange streak in the sky, "I remember."

"You tied it up with as pretty a little bandage as anyone ever made out of four inches of pocket handkerchief, and then pitched straight over at my feet as though someone had pushed you."

"I remember."

"You very nearly scared the lights out of me," murmured Kit, tilting his red head back against the mantel, and drawing a long luxurious breath of the aromatic smell of dancing flame. "Lord, what a——"

"Kit, this catch is stuck—help me, won't you? I want to smell the frost in the box-trees."

"No frost to-night, my lamb, not with that wind. Still, anything to help a lady!"

He was at her side in three long strides; a second later the wind, cold and sweet and wild, was all about them.

"There!" Her voice rose, softly triumphant. "You can smell it now—oh, heavenly! What do they call it—the odour of eternity?"

"I doubt whether eternity smells so sweet to some of us," said Kit Baird.

"The last time I saw you we were standing here." The little voice was suddenly edged with magic. "Right here, only you were—closer. It was a green sky, so still and clear and sad, and there was one star. I wished on it——"

Suddenly his fingers were linked about hers, careless and possessive. His low laughter was in her ears.

"Lindy, Lindy, those gloves. . . wherever did you put those gloves?"

"You knew all the time, didn't you, Kit? Did it amuse

you that I was so shameless as to leave them? So shameless as to come back? They're on the couch, in the left-hand corner. Get them, will you?"

He said, still laughing, "No."

"Ten years ago . . ." she whispered. "The star was right over those holly trees. . . . I thought that you were going to kiss me."

"I thought so, too," he told her. "What did you wish on the star, little Lindy?"

"I wished that you would kiss me," said the small lovely voice.

"Let's find the star again, Lindy—look, over the holly, isn't that something shining?"

"You were bending your head," the dreaming voice told him. "And I was lifting mine. And then, in the hall, someone started playing 'Underneath the Stars.' And that was that. . . ."

"And that," said Kit Baird, slowly and evenly as their hands swung apart, "was that. . . . Not forgotten Sunny yet, Lindy?"

Lindy, pale in the shadows, pulled the dark furs closer.

"It's cold. Close the window—come back to the fire." After a long moment she said, in a stilled tone of wonder, as though the question itself were a reply, "Forgotten Sunny?" And after a longer moment still, with her hands stretched out to the dancing flames: "Have you, Kit?"

He said, "No. Not in this world. Nor the next either, if the devil gives us one to play with. . . . Pretty hands you've got, little Lindy."

She looked at them as though she were seeing them for the first time, wrung them hard together, and asked in a small voice shaken with something deeper than terror, "Was it you that made Sunny kill herself, Kit?"

II

"I MADE Sunny kill herself?" He stared down at her, his face frozen to a white mask of incredulity. "I? Sunny never looked at me, never thought of me, never knew I was there unless there was music playing. What in God's name made you think that?"

"Something—something I heard. . . . Were you in Baltimore the Saturday before Sunny died, Kit?"

"Yes. I was there with——" He pulled up abruptly. "Let's get this straight. Someone told you that I was there with Sunny?"

"Sunny was there, Kit. She was there with a man. She motored over from Washington to meet him—she thought he was going to marry her. It wasn't you?"

He said, "No. How did you know all this, Lindy?"

"She wrote me a letter to Richmond the day before. She always told me everything—she didn't want Jill to know, because she was afraid that Mrs. Leighton would be angry with Jill if she thought that she'd helped her. Mrs. Leighton didn't like the man, Sunny said. She didn't like you, either, did she, Kit?"

In spite of the concentration that was carving lines between his eyes he permitted himself a grim little smile.

"Mrs. Leighton didn't like anyone who preferred her charming daughters to her charming self. You're quite right, she didn't like me a bit. . . . Didn't Sunny tell you the man's name, Lindy?"

"No; she wanted it to be a surprise. She said that he was the most wonderful man in the world."

"So you thought that it must be I?" The grim smile deepened. "Very, very flattering, but the description happens to be misleading."

"Kit, that letter—afterward I used to cry until morning remembering it. So wild with joy and life and adventure—it wasn't like a letter, it was like a bird singing."

He said, suddenly and strongly, "Don't." After a moment he added equably, "Sorry—don't mind me. I'm more kinds of a fool than even I realized. . . . You see, I did see Sunny in Baltimore that Saturday, Lindy. I'd come up from Quantico to usher at a wedding in Wilmington—you remember, Kim Farrell from the State Department?"

"The funny little one with the freckles and the slanty eyebrows?"

"Yes, shot to pieces near Soissons. Well, Larry had come up from Mead to be an usher, too, and after it was over the two of us ducked out and headed back for Washington in his roadster. Just outside of Baltimore we heard that the road was torn up, so we decided to stop at the hotel and pick up some information about detours. Larry went to the desk to find out, and I stepped out to the bar to get a drink. When I got back he wasn't there, and I thought that he was probably telephoning Joel in Washington that we'd be late for dinner. I started off toward the telephone booths; there was a long string of them and outside the last one I saw Sunny——" He put one hand over his eyes and said despairingly, "Lindy, I can see her now!"

"Kit, don't talk about it if it makes you so wretched —don't!"

"Lindy, she had on that little gray squirrel cap, the one that made her hair look like gold bubbles, and the big gray fur cape, and a muff no bigger than my hands. She was standing there turned away a little with the muff up against her face, and I started over across to her. I was halfway there before she saw me, and when she did she put out both hands as though she were trying to push me away—and—I saw her face."

The girl beside him whispered, "Kit, don't mind so much—don't mind so much. She never wanted anyone to mind."

"Lindy, her face was drowned with crying, it was ruined by it, destroyed—it wasn't Sunny's face at all —it belonged to some beaten, starved, tortured child. . . . She stood there with the tears running down over it, washing out all its loveliness, shaking her head at me—shaking it and pushing me away. . . . Someone in the telephone booth must have spoken to her, because she moved closer to it and said something, still shaking her head with the muff up to her face. . . . I swung around and went back to the bar and had two more drinks. Larry picked me up there and we went on to Washington. . . . I never saw her again."

"I did," said Lindy Marsden.

"You? I thought you said that you were in Richmond?"

"Jill telephoned me the next day that they were all dreadfully upset about Sunny; that apparently she'd had a shock of some kind, and that they couldn't find out what it was. I knew then that something had gone wrong in Baltimore, and I took the next train. I didn't even wait to pack a bag. Sunny was up in her bedroom; she was sitting all huddled up in a blue quilted wrapper in a big chair by the window. Her eyes were wide open,

but she looked—she looked as though she were asleep. When she saw me, she said, 'Oh, it's you! . . . You're the one that knows, aren't you?' I said, 'Darling, anything that you don't want me to know is forgotten.' She stared at me with the strangest, hardest little smile and said, 'Oh, but you can't forget. Didn't you know that? You can't ever forget. That's it.' And suddenly I was dreadfully frightened. I came over and took hold of her and said, 'Sunny, it's me. It's Lindy, who loves you.' And she put both hands over her ears, and screamed out like a child in a nightmare, 'Lindy, he didn't want me—Lindy, Lindy, don't tell them—he didn't want me!' I stayed with her all that night; she never stopped shivering for one minute, but I didn't find out much more. Apparently she'd met him as they arranged, and everything was beautiful until he remarked that he had hesitated to ask her to marry him before because he hadn't wanted her money to be a barrier between them. And of course she joyfully told him that there wasn't any money to be a barrier, that it all belonged to Jill. . . . Kit, he didn't even bring her back. He telephoned the garage for her roadster, and told her that if she hurried she could make it by dark . . . "

"I've never killed a man yet—with any particular pleasure," said Kit Baird evenly. "But I'm beginning to see now that it might be as agreeable a way to spend an evening as you could think of."

"She was absolutely quiet when I left her," Lindy said. "So little, and gentle—she wasn't crying a bit. She promised that if I'd go to Richmond and pack up some things and come back to her for two or three weeks, she'd stay in bed and rest for a day or so, and even try to go to the Randalls' party Tuesday night if she felt

up to it. . . . Just before I got to the door she called me back. She was lying all curled up in a little ball in the middle of the bed, with her hair fluffed out around her face, and her eyes so bright—you can't think. She said, 'Wouldn't you say that I was quite pretty, Lindy?' I wanted to cry dreadfully, but I laughed and said, 'The prettiest thing that ever breathed, darling.' She said, with her face twisted into that darling smile of hers, like a good baby, 'Funny, that's what I thought, too. . . . I've been so afraid of all those mirrors, Lindy.' I said, 'They'll never show you how lovely you are, Loveliness,' and kissed her, and went out. . . . That was Sunday night; I was to come back Wednesday. On Tuesday they telephoned me that they'd—found her. . . . Do you think—Kit, do you think that I could have stopped her if I hadn't gone?"

"No," said the man. "She was dead the day that I saw her in Baltimore. What did it matter if they waited five days or fifty years to bury her? . . . Want another log, Lindy? Your hands are cold."

"Two logs," she whispered. "Oh, Kit, when they played 'Underneath the Stars' to-night, it was as though she were here again. I could see her in that dress she wore that last night—remember, all silver, with her hair like daffodils in the candlelight, dancing, dancing——"

"Lindy," said the man beside her gently, "let's not talk about her, do you mind? I know that I'm a fool, but I honestly can't stand much more. There, that's what I call a real conflagration. Stand closer to it; you want to get really warm before you negotiate the north passage upstairs."

"I'm cold inside. We shouldn't have come back—we shouldn't have, truly. These were her parties; she loved

them more than anyone—it was wicked and cruel to come back without her. You know it, too."

"I know nothing of the kind. She'd want us to come—she'd want us to have a beautiful time. Now drop it, will you, little Lindy? Here, give me those ridiculous hands, and I'll get them warm for you. And while I'm doing it you can tell me what you've been doing with yourself all these years. Still breaking hearts right and left?"

"And north and south," she assented lightly, her teeth in her lip.

"Half a dozen violent affairs a year?"

"Oh, half a hundred!"

Kit, looking down at her with eyes suddenly gentle, said:

"I was so sorry about Marsden, Lindy dear. He must have been the finest kind of a fellow. I hoped that you two were going to live happy ever after."

Lindy said very simply, "I do think he was awfully happy for those few days. Only five days—just think, Kit. And now all that I can remember is how brown his hands were, and the way his eyes crinkled up when he laughed; he had the *youngest* laugh. He wasn't twenty-four—he wouldn't have been twenty-four until November—but now I can't even remember what day. . . . I wish—oh, I wish that I could remember what day."

Kit said:

"It's better to remember how he laughed. And five days is rather a lot to be happy, isn't it?"

"Quite, quite a lot." She stood staring down at the red caverns in the fire, her hands quiet in his. After a moment she said, "No one thought that I loved him, but he thought so. The others all believed it was his money. . . ."

"Not I," said the red-headed young man.

"Didn't you, Kit? You were right: it wasn't his money. I never cared a great deal about money; it's nice, but not very interesting. . . . And they were right, too. I never loved him; never, never at all. . . ."

And Kit, who knew when to say nothing, said nothing.

"But I did make him think I did, truly," she whispered, "and I don't think that it was wicked to marry him when he wanted me so. It was so heavenly to have someone want you like that—to have someone need you like that. . . . I'm glad I married him, Kit."

"I'm glad, too, little Lindy."

For a moment silence hung about them, dark and kind and friendly. It was Lindy who broke it, freeing her hands very gently and speaking more gently still.

"Kit, do you know why I got up this party?"

"Because you are a good child and wanted even the bad ones to have one more good time to remember."

"No. I got it up because there was something I had to ask you, and something I had to tell you. I've waited ten years for a chance."

He said, "You wanted to ask me whether I were responsible for Sunny Leighton's death?"

"Yes. But even if you had told me that you were, I still had something to tell you. That's why I came back to Lady Court—why I came back for the gloves——"

"Lindy, Lindy, can it be that you're leading me on?"

"Kit, don't laugh. I came back to tell you that I love you. I've always loved you. I love you so that I can't stand it any more. . . . Are you laughing?"

He said, "Lindy, you darling little fool!"

His arms were about her; he could feel her tears on his hand.

"Want the truth, Lindy?"

The small, terrified voice whispered, "No!"

"You'll have to take it, darling; it's all I have to give you. I've never loved anyone in my life but Sunny Leighton. I never will. . . . Lindy, don't pull away—stay this way just a minute longer, will you?" He laid his cheek against the little velvet darkness that was her hair, and said in a voice that broke abruptly and amazingly, "It's so damned sweet to know you care a little."

The small voice against his heart said fiercely, "I don't care a little. I love you so that it kills me."

"When you say that," he whispered, his arms holding her closer, "I should let you go. It ought to show you what kind of a rotter I am that I don't let you go."

"I don't care what kind of a rotter you are. I don't care—I don't care. Don't ever let me go."

"Lindy," he said, "you don't know how lonely I've been—lonelier than hell, every day and every night since I was born. Just to hold gentleness in your arms. . . . I'll put that down in the empty credit column that I'm keeping to show God one of these days."

"I'm lonely, too. Don't—don't let me go."

He brushed her hair with his lips, loosed the hands about his neck, and stood away from her, his eyes on the fire.

"My blessed child, I let you go before I ever touched you. Lindy, I don't go in much for talking about myself, do I?"

"Not ever," said the desolate small voice.

"Well, this time I'm going to, for a good three minutes. And I'll preface the life history that I'm about to present to you with the statement that I don't lie. I steal a little, and I cheat a good deal, and I'm not above a neat forgery or a tidy bit of blackmail, but I don't lie.

Not since I was seven. Not once. So you can consider this as authentic as though it came straight from George Washington's father's little boy. Did you listen to me when I was telling you that I'm a rotter?"

Lindy's face, pearl-white in the shadows, twisted to a forlorn smile.

"Not much."

"Well, listen now. I'm a rotter. Not the nice, romantic kind that you think I mean—the kind that lives in books, and drinks just a little too much champagne just a little too often, and loves pretty married ladies wisely and not too well, and loses gallantly on the horses, and wins gallantly on the wheel—not that kind at all. I've served three terms in three different jails, and I ought to have served fifty. I'm a card sharp, and a dead beat, and when I'm run into a corner I do a little light blackmailing. Are you listening?"

She said tonelessly, "Yes."

"That's right; listen hard, because I'm not likely to get as expansive as this again in this incarnation. The closest that I've come to an honourable profession since I severed connections somewhat abruptly with the Polish army is my present job. Want to know what that is?"

She said in that same toneless voice:

"Yes."

"I'm a rum runner," he informed her amiably, his hands in his pockets. "The best rum runner in the world, if you ask me. I've got as good a little ship as ever you saw waiting for me off the Jersey Coast this minute; we're overdue at Las Cayas in the Bahamas now, because I thought I'd like one more tune with Joel Hardy. I've got a gang on her of thirty men that think that Beelzebub's my understudy—and they're

the boys that ought to know! This is what I do when I'm respectable. . . . Heard enough, Lindy?"

The girl beside him said softly, "Quite enough. I don't care whether you make your living robbing graves. Will you ask me to marry you, or shall I ask you?"

"Lindy, you're the loveliest little fool." He sank his hands deeper in his pockets and added pleasantly, "I've lived on too many women's money to take yours. Get your gloves, and go upstairs."

At the word "women" she flinched for the first time, but when she moved it was only to come a step closer.

"They were luckier than I, those other women," she said clearly, lifting her face to his. "What did they have that I lack?"

And at the terrified gallantry of the small face, he put his arms about her again. "Oh, Spartan child," he mocked softly, "begging the wolf to gnaw a little harder! What shall I do with you, Lindy?"

"Hold me, don't let me go. I'll give you all the money; you can throw it in the Atlantic if you want to. Didn't you say you were a good rum runner?"

"The best. Incorrigible child, are you proposing to join us?"

"Las Cayas in the Bahamas," murmured the incorrigible child. "Oh, that has a magic sound! . . . Las Cayas. Sunlight on golden sands—palms like green feathers against dark blue skies. Starlight, starlight . . . all the stars in the world to wish on. Would you kiss me then, Kit?"

"I'll kiss you now. Darling, darling, I don't love you, but I love your eyes and that absurd little curly mouth. . . . Lindy. . . ."

After a long silence he said slowly, "Larry Redmond

has a job for me; rather an important piece of investigating in Poland. Shall I take it, and let the ship sail?"

"Can I come, too?"

"No, you small maniac, you cannot come, too. I'd love to drag you all over Poland in little fur boots with silver sleigh bells in your ears, but I'm afraid that it wouldn't work out. Lindy, don't you mind that Sunny's the one I loved?"

"I mind . . . frightfully. I loved her, too. I'd bring her back for you if I could, Kit. Truly, truly—only since I can't do that, wouldn't I be better than nothing?"

"If it weren't so late," he said unsteadily, "if there wasn't someone on the stairs out there, I'd go down on my knees and kiss your feet. As it is, I'll just bend over and put another log on the fire, very casual and detached like—— Hello there, Larry Redmond. Give us a hand with this log, will you?"

Larry, hurling his cigarette in a wide arc into the fire, took hold nobly, remarking over his shoulder:

"I suppose you two magpies know that the rest of this crew will be down in a minute or so, howling like banshees for refreshments?"

"Oh, heavens," wailed Lindy, all soft contrition. "Is it so late, honestly? Larry, I ought to be destroyed; it's all my fault. I absolutely hung on to Kit, because it was such—such fun talking over old times. I'll hurry like mad—Kit, you must, too!" She was gone in a flurry of skirts and laughter, and the men by the fire smiled companionably at the sound of her light feet racing up the steps, her light voice echoing along the empty halls.

"Jill—Jill Leighton! Hurry up and get at those hampers, will you, darling? Nobody's done anything at all and it's getting frightfully late——" A door slammed

sharply across her invocations and Larry, bending his head over another cigarette, said with conviction:

"There's a beguiling creature! All Marsden's millions don't seem to affect her more than a very thin dime. Looks younger than she did ten years ago, doesn't she?"

"She does," agreed Kit absently. "It's a trick they seem to acquire these days. Still think I could handle that Polish job, Larry?"

"None better. You're absolutely familiar with the terrain, and your knowledge of Polish would be invaluable, leaving aside the French and German. You can keep your mouth shut and your eyes open—if you're asking me, you're our man."

"I'm no good, you know," said Kit Baird.

"I never knew a man that was to admit it," remarked Larry pensively. "You'll do, my lad. The job's yours if you want it."

"You're a damn bad judge of men," commented the red-headed gentleman beside him. "Still, I'd rather extend myself not to let you down. If I can get out of something that I'm a bit tied up in at present, I'll take you on. All right if I let you know this week?"

"Absolutely."

"You and Joel," said the red-headed young man a little thickly—"you two——" He broke off abruptly, and moved toward the door. "I've missed you two like hell. If I stick around here much longer I'll be crying on your shoulder. What in—— Sorry, Jill, it's idle to pretend that I was looking where I was going. See you later."

Jill Leighton paused uncertainly in her light advance down the room, peering into the fire-lit shadows.

"Lindy said no one was down yet—how in the world do you turn on these lights?" Almost before the words

were off her lips they flooded about her, and she saw him; it had not taken more than a stride to bring him to the door, cutting off her retreat so casually that it was difficult to know whether it was deliberate.

"Oh," she said, her face hardening to a delicate mask of contempt, no trace of the sick panic that consumed her in the clear, disdainful voice, "It's you!"

"None other, Jill." He did not move from the threshold, his face hard, too, his voice harder. "I am obviously Heaven's favourite child to-night. I'd been wondering a bit how I was going to obtain this coveted interview short of abduction, and here, no less, you come as conveniently as though I'd whistled. Who says I don't believe in fairies?"

Jill, looking like a strayed dryad in her floating green and silver, permitted the contempt to become a trifle more open.

"Do you consider yourself amusing?"

"Candidly, I don't. The faintly implied rebuke in your tone is justified—unlike some of your friends, I have no particular aptitude for clowning. The good, solid, old-fashioned American business man, with no nonsense about him—that's me. So let's get down to business." He took a step toward her, his pleasant voice raised to something menacingly out of control. "How dared you write me that letter?"

To Jill, the brown young man bearing relentlessly down on her looked singularly unlike a good, solid, old-fashioned American business man—he looked three inches taller than she remembered him and three times more terrible, rather like an avenging angel—a fallen angel. . . . She remembered Sunny's bright hair, and stood her ground, unflinching.

"How dared you write such things to me?"

"It requires no great courage to ask the girl that you love to marry you," said Larry Redmond grimly. "Though I'll admit that it isn't particularly edifying to choose the day before sailing into battle to do it. The hero in the book wouldn't, I know, but I'm not a hero in a book—or out of one. I was afraid to my bones that if you didn't know how much I loved you you wouldn't wait for me, and I was ass enough to think that if you did—well, never mind. That was my mistake. I'll admit I lost my head—ordered off overnight without even a chance of a word with you, and leaving a whole damned country full of men behind me! I stayed awake all that night thinking how young you were—and how beautiful —and how dear——"

"And how rich," said the green wood nymph clearly.

For a paralyzing space while she could have counted ten heart beats the man who had asked her to marry him stood staring down at her. She closed her eyes so that she could not see his face, only to feel his hands, cruelly heavy, on her shoulders.

"That's twice that you've called me a fortune hunter," he said, in a voice that came from some place more distant and more cold than any she had ever known. "I have an idea that it's going to be the last time. Sit there."

She sat, clinging to the chair arms with icy hands; and then because she remembered Sunny's laughter, she once more fixed on him unwavering eyes.

"Larry, there's no use humiliating yourself—and me —by this kind of thing. It's horrible—it's indecent to talk about caring for me. And you can't frighten me. Nothing can frighten me any more. Please let me go."

"Sit still. What made you think it was your money that I cared for?"

"I don't think—I know. Larry, I know everything. I knew before I got the letter."

"You knew what, in God's name?"

"I knew about Sunny—about you and Sunny. Now will you let me go?"

"I will not let you stir one inch. Are you clean out of your head?"

"Oh," she cried passionately. "You're contemptible—vile and stupid and contemptible—to keep up this farce with me!"

"What did you know about Sunny and about me?"

"I know everything, I tell you. I know that when you found that she had no money you turned her out into the street. I know that she told you that the money was mine. Is there anything more that you'd like to tell me?"

"I turned Sunny into the street? *Sunny?*"

"I know that she had not been dead two days when you were writing me weeping over her and begging me to wait until you came back. To wait for you. Oh—oh——"

Suddenly she twisted in the chair, clinching her teeth to keep back the storm of tears flooding up to engulf her, the tears that had been waiting ten years to beat their way through.

The man before her said:

"One of us is stark, staring mad. This is the first time in my life that I ever knew whether Sunny had money or hadn't. I did know that there was some mystery about her death, something about an unhappy love affair——"

Jill wrung her hands together with a frantic little sound that was meant to be laughter.

"You dare—you dare to stand there and talk to me about mysteries! There's no mystery about Sunny's

death—none. When you sent her back from Baltimore that night you became as truly her murderer as any poor devil with a knife who swings by his neck till dead."

"Jill, listen to me—are you listening? I never laid eyes on Sunny in Baltimore; I swear it before God. There's been a hideous mistake."

She asked in a drowned whisper: "It wasn't you? It wasn't you that Sunny went to?"

"I tell you that I never thought of Sunny in my life except to envy her for being near you. She was your little sister—I loved her for being your sister, and she was sweet to me because she was sweet to everyone."

She sat quite still, looking up at him with a face so lost and dazed that he knelt suddenly beside her and put his arms about her.

She said, "All the time—all the time it was me, Larry?"

"You—ever since the first time I saw you. You coming down that long flight of stairs at the Randalls' in something that looked like a little gray cloud—see how I remember, Jill—you had silver buckles on your slippers and an enormous fan of gray feathers, and someone behind me said, 'There are those pretty Leighton girls!' But I only saw the Leighton girl in gray, the one with the fan, the one called Jill, the one that I'd been looking for half a lifetime, and who was smiling down at me because she knew it. Smile at me again, Jill."

She cried, "Oh, Larry, all those years—all those years! They're gone—I've lost them for us."

"Jill, let's forget what we've lost, and remember what we've found. Bless that girl Lindy! If I buy you a gray cloud will you come down the stairs again, carrying the fan?"

"It's gone," she whispered. "It's gone, too."

"Where do good fans go when they die? There must be a star full of them somewhere. Never mind, Blessed; I'll get you another fan, and new silver buckles for your slippers, and a beautiful new world for a rotten old one —all for one smile. Smile at me, Jill."

"I can't. If you'd done it to me, you couldn't smile. I've cheated us out of ten beautiful years—I've poisoned all the years we've got left. If I hadn't been vile myself I'd never have believed those vile things about you, I'd never have written that—that *filthy* letter."

She pushed him from her with a sudden shudder, burying her face in the faded cushions.

And for a moment he made no motion toward her. For a moment he did not even see her; he was once more standing in a little clearing in a wood in France, leaning against a beech tree and staring down at the straight, dainty words marching so neatly across the blue sheet in his hand, with the guns sounding in his ears, distant as a dream. And as of old, he flung up his arm, to shield his eyes from the terrible little words. Still, still, they came marching toward him, across the seas, across the years—enemies more dreadful than any he had found, for all their exquisite and orderly array. . . . He heard her sob once, and dropped his hand, so that it might reach hers and give her comfort.

"My fault, every time," he said. "If I hadn't been the ass of the world I'd have known when I read it that there was some incredible mistake. Only, Jill, I swear I was so—so dazed—so numbed that I do honestly think that my brain stopped working. If I hadn't been so sure that it was going to be the most beautiful love letter that a lucky guy ever got——" He tried a laugh without marked success, and after a brief pause said, "D'you know, it was three good years before I could open a letter

without feeling actual physical nausea swamp me. . . . I'm telling you that because I'm crawling around in dark corners looking for excuses for being the damnedest fool in three continents. But there aren't any. . . . Don't grudge those lost years, Jill. It's taken ten of them to give me sense enough to ask you a question that would have cleared everything up in as many seconds. It's taken ten of them to make you lovelier than anyone else in the world. . . . Shall we call those lunatics upstairs down and tell them we're engaged?"

Jill lifted her head from the cushion, her eyes brilliant with some strange fever.

"But we aren't engaged," she said clearly.

Larry Redmond released her hand.

"I see," he said slowly.

"We aren't ever going to be engaged."

He said again more slowly still, "I see," and rose to his feet. Jill rose, too.

"We're only going to be married," she informed him. "How long does it take to be married? Let's hurry. . . ."

"If people are the kind of people that go in for this kind of thing," remarked a dispassionate voice from the doorway, "I wish that they'd have the rudimentary nice feeling to pick out a good hole and corner and stick to it. Personally, I am now shot to pieces for the rest of the evening, so go right ahead, don't mind me."

Jill raised a flushed and exultant countenance from a concealing shoulder.

"Trudi, go away! He loves me—he loves me dreadfully. Don't tell anyone, will you, darling?"

"Why, it's that Leighton girl!" remarked Trudi virtuously to the universe at large, "and that nice quiet Mr. Redmond. Kindly consider me all in a heap. Jill, if

you have nothing to tell any of us except that the young man loves you dreadfully, I'll just drift off into the hall and head off the others until you have time to wash your face, brush your hair, and do deep-breathing exercises for about five minutes. Otherwise the casual observer might think that your own feelings were temporarily involved. In the meantime, I'll sit at the foot of the stairs and pretend I've turned my ankle rather badly. If I go 'Cuck-oo!' once, you'll know they're coming. If I do it twice, you'll know I couldn't hold them. I won't do it more than twice, probably; someone might think it sounded queer. You never can tell about people in this world—just great big balls of convention, if you ask me. Jill, you little loon, stop looking like that! He's probably quite horrid if you get to know him; he looks to me like the kind of a man that wants to read you bits out of the papers and doesn't believe that really nice people eat snails. I eat snails, Larry."

"Well, eat them in the hall, will you?" suggested Mr. Redmond inhospitably. "You know as well as I do, Trudi, that with this crew I'll never get another word in edgewise with this girl to-night."

"And a good thing, too, if you ask me. Anything more revolting . . ." Trudi's voice withdrew majestically in the direction of the stairs, whence issued shortly small, experimental moans, groans, and curses suitable to one suffering a minor injury.

"Oh, how I adore Trudi!" laughed Jill, on tiptoe before the dim mirror, touching the bright disorder of her hair to its accustomed soft decorum. "How I adore everyone—what a heavenly, heavenly party! Oh, Larry, I'd forgotten how beautiful it was to be happy—no, no, darling—be careful!"

"Jill, listen; it doesn't make any difference now—

nothing makes any difference now except that we've remembered how to be happy, but just before we forget all the unhappy things forever I wish that you'd tell me where you heard that ghastly nonsense about me and Sunny and Baltimore?"

The joyous face in the mirror clouded, fixed in concentration.

"Larry, that's what's so strange. I don't see how I ever—I think it was Lindy first—or maybe that was afterwards. It was Lindy who told about Sunny's going there; I'm sure of that, I know, because Mother and I thought at first that maybe—maybe Sunny had been—murdered, by a tramp or a maniac of some kind, so Lindy thought we ought to know just what had happened. She wouldn't ever have told us if it hadn't been for that."

"Lindy told you that I'd taken Sunny to Baltimore? Jill, we're dreaming."

"No, no, she said—— Weren't you in Baltimore that Saturday, Larry?"

"I was never in Baltimore in my life except at a house-party the first winter that I was in Washington."

"Not the Saturday before Sunny died?"

"That was January, the week before I sailed, wasn't it? No, I was in Wilmington for Kim Farrell's wedding. Kit and I motored over——" He halted, staring at her incredulously over memory's warning hand. "You're right; I was in Baltimore. At the hotel, for about half an hour. We got off the road——"

"You didn't go there to meet Sunny?"

"I never laid eyes on Sunny, Jill. Was she there?"

"Yes—with a man. Someone—someone thought it was you."

"Lindy?"

"Cuckoo!" cried the gay voice from the stairs.

"No . . . not Lindy."

"Then who?"

"Larry, wait; I've got to straighten this thing out. Someone saw you there—and saw Sunny—and must have jumped at the conclusion that you were there together."

"And that someone," remarked Larry, his face suddenly grim, "is responsible for ten lost years. And a bit over, too. Who saw me in Baltimore, Jill?"

"Cuck-oo, Cuck-oo!" Blithe and imperious it rose, with the sound of half a dozen scoffing voices breaking over it.

"Just wait till I get a chance to think, will you, darling? I can't think at all, now, except that it's all over and we're so happy—I don't want to spoil things by getting them all twisted again. . . . Larry, darling, darling, please let's just be happy."

He stared down at the lovely flushed face, so piteously eager, and abruptly his own relaxed.

"Happiness it is!" he said. "Everything else can wait. Now we'll show those maniacs in the hall what a party is. . . . Hi, what goes on out there?"

"It's the Sheridan woman!" shouted Doug King. "She's stretched clear across the staircase with what she claims is a vitally injured leg, and she's carrying on like a blasted clock. Come on out and hear her."

"I think I just might manage if I did it on four paws," remarked Trudi's voice, suddenly brisk. "Or even if I could drape myself around you and Joel and hop—like that, if you get what I mean."

"Game, I calls it," commented Joel. "Especially coming down bang like that on the wrong foot each time. Never one to spare yourself, were you, Trudi?"

Trudi, festooned gracefully about the two masculine

forms in the doorway, had the grace to look disconcerted for almost three seconds.

"If you went in for—uh—anatomy, my glib young sophist," she commented loftily, "you'd jolly well know that it's up to the sufferer to bear down heavily on the injured limb or take the consequences. If you don't it's liable to swell up or cave in or mortify or something. This chair, darling—and a stool—and two pillows. And I think some ice would help, too; they say ice is the very thing for this kind of thing—alcohol's good, too—ask anybody. You might just pour the alcohol on the ice and leave it here beside me—in rather a tall glass, thanks. I can manage the rest all by myself. I knew that first-aid course was going to come in handy some day."

Sherry, eyeing the blandly impish countenance before him, inquired suspiciously, "I think there's some kind of monkey business going on. What were you yipping 'Cuckoo, cuckoo!' for all the time out there?"

"How like you, Sheridan, to describe two or three vague little noises in that hysterical way. All the time, indeed! I'd have you know that all the Derriers make that noise when they're in trouble—it's a family trait, like whistling to keep your courage up, only rather nicer, I think. And even you will admit that it would ill become me, as practically the last of the Derriers, to go back on the old family traditions at this stage of the game. I'll thank you for a little more of that alcohol, Mr. King."

"I never heard you make a noise like that in my whole enduring life," commented Sherry incredulously. "I never——"

"You never pay the slightest attention to me when I'm in trouble, beloved. You're one of these blooming

hedonists; if you smell trouble five miles off you stuff cotton in your ears and tie bandages around your eyes and go and hide in the darkest corner in the place with your head under three pillows—— Great jumping Jehoshaphat, children, listen to that wind! I'll bet it's tearing the boxwood up by the roots—and kindly look at the way it flattens down those flames. God help all poor sailors on the Potomac to-night, say I."

"What's the weather report, little Mabel with your face against the pane?"

Ray, her nose slightly pink from the zeal with which she had applied it to the square of inky blackness, remarked plaintively over her shoulder:

"It's perfectly *frightful.* All those trees over by the—the graveyard are absolutely twisting themselves inside out. It's too dark to see anything else, but I think it's beginning to rain. Listen!"

Over the reassuring crackle of the flames and the soaring voice of the wind rose the light, ominous patter, and Doug King's voice lifted in a lusty groan.

"Well, there goes the paper chase to-morrow. Even if it lets up we'd leave tracks all over the place. No target practice either, I'd like to bet. Never mind. Who cares? Who cares a tinker's dam what's happening outside when we have visions to dazzle these old eyes like those over yonder?"

He gestured dramatically toward the doorway where stood Hanna, tall and radiant in trailing white and diamonds, and Lindy, exquisite in clouds of violet tulle and pearls, hands linked like school girls, smiling back at him conqueringly.

"Hanna, you're the most elegant thing I've laid eyes on since gentlemen discovered they preferred blondes! Still and all, you're my girl, Lindy. Come on over and

sit by ole Uncle Doug and he'll tell you all about how little Reginald Rabbit got chased clear through the brier patch into the reservoir by mean old Farmer Whiskery. Nobody tells stories like ole Uncle Doug."

"I'm not going to sit down anywhere, and neither are you. Come on, everyone, we simply must get started. Eight, nine, ten, eleven—who isn't down?"

"Us," called Chatty's cheerful little voice from the hall. "We've been dress-makering.—Oh, Trudi Sheridan, where's that lacquer red you were boasting about?"

Trudi cast a casually appraising glance down at the beige sports dress that reached almost down to her knees and clear down to her knuckles.

"Would you believe it, I spilled two ounces of Tonty's 'Passionate Folly' plumb down the front of it? It looks like something the cat would rush straight off to the ash-barrel. I've been crying ever since quite a good deal. Didn't you hear me? That was me falling downstairs, too; blinded with tears—you know how it is. Lindy, I don't have to work any, do I? This right leg of mine's as good as gone—I doubt whether it ever sees another sunrise."

"Trudi, I do think you're the most dreadful liar." Chatty, her dimples riotous, clutched accusingly at Trudi's decorously covered shoulders. "I don't know about your leg, but I do know perfectly well that you put on this taffy-coloured jumper because you thought I was going to feel out of it to-night without an evening dress. Honestly, of all the simpletons!" She administered a final shake, and yielded to a series of small, hilarious giggles. "And Tom Ross and I standing up there hacking the front out of this thing with a pair of nail scissors and filling in the four inches that we overestimated with lace off my nightgown. Maybe you aren't the only

simpleton around this place!" She gave an affectionate twitch to her wide dark blue taffeta skirts and added gleefully, "Imagine me worrying my head over an evening dress! Bohemia (she's the coloured lady that helps out) says I spend so much of my life trying to decide whether Junior's old pajamas would look better as awnings for the back porch or seat covers for the Dodge that I never know whether my own dress is on backward or forward. I want to tell you that I took an old pink velvet cape that I had in my trousseau and made it over into . . . " The gay voice checked, wavered, trailed off into space.

Tom Ross was staring at the jubilant little figure in its neat dark blue and snowy frills with a look of such torn despair that all the roses blooming so dauntlessly in the gay face faded to wan contrition, and the light tongue faltered, stricken to silence. After a long moment she said in a small, apologetic voice thick with unshed tears, "Of course the only reason I can't wear a different dress three times a day is because I'm such a perfect *donkey* of a manager. Mummy always said I was the worst manager she ever saw in her whole life—she always said that all the money that didn't drop through the holes in my pockets slipped right out through my fingers two seconds afterward. She said——"

Tom Ross, leaning swiftly forward, tilted the round, woebegone countenance up to his, and deposited two long, deliberate kisses on the drowned lashes.

"She's the best manager since Eve," he said evenly. "She manages to keep four children, eight guinea pigs, three waltzing mice, two darkies, a canary, a cat, a dog, a can full of polliwogs, and an adoring husband housed, fed, and contented on an income that wouldn't keep an

Eskimo in ice cream. Never you mind, young feller; first thing you know you'll be having terrapin for breakfast and a lace boudoir cap! In the meantime, if it's all the same to the rest of this festive gathering, I move that we eat. I'm getting hungry enough to go for the berries off the holly trees!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You and me both, ole kid!"

"Thank heavens the tables are ready! Larry, you and Doug get chairs."

"Do I just scatter sandwiches around and let them lie where they fall?"

"Sherry, get on the job again. Can't we have candlelight now, Lindy?"

The voices flooded over the ugly two minutes in a frantic torrent of babble, washing out the memory of Tom's pale desperation, of Chatty's pitiful nonsense—washing out the sick compunction that had bound the room in a painful web of silence.

"Of course we can have candlelight! Hurry, Tom, that means you. There's a taper on the mantel and you can use that green stool for the highest brackets."

"Oh, kind heavens, here's caviar, the pale gray kind that always makes me go hot and cold all over, like Elinor Glyn."

"Kit, you know where the switch is, don't you? Turn out those lights, there's a lamb. Hurry, Tom. . . . Oh, why in the world does anyone ever use anything but candlelight?"

Under Tom's expert fingers the room was flowering from a place of jewelled darkness into a place of magic lights. Little pools quivered and widened, velvet shadows shifted and fled; under the spell of the dancing flames of candles and the leaping flames of the fire it was

suddenly and mysteriously alive. And by some glamorous illusion all the women were suddenly lovely as forgotten dreams, all the men adventurous as knights. Chatty's despised dress was only a shadow, but above the shadow her brown curls danced into something brighter than gold, her gray eyes into something braver than blue. Lindy and her amethyst clouds had melted into the jade background of her great chair, but in the oval mirror opposite the candles her shadowy eyes and shadowy smile hung like a portrait of romance itself, and when she stirred the room was suddenly filled with violets. Jill Leighton, lovely and tremulous in her floating green as Daphne hovering between Apollo's arms and a leafy refuge, turned an enchanted face to Larry's grave worship, heedless of the mockery of Trudi's lifted brows. Trudi's offering on friendship's altar had faded to a honey-coloured mist, but above it smiled wise and witty eyes, and lips both shrewd and mirthful. In one corner of the couch Hanna's ivory and gold gleamed incredible as a miracle and the earrings trailing to her shoulders glittered like fairy fountains. Not a hand breadth from her, Ray Hardy's vivid little face was suddenly bewitched into dusky beauty between its swinging hoops of gold, and her gay orange frock flamed like a banner.

She leaned eagerly toward the vision at her side. "Oh, Hanna, I do know better but I can't help it. Do you get absolutely ill hearing how incredible you are?"

The colour in the perfect face did not deepen an iota, but the friendly smile did.

"You mean yellow hair and a straight nose? I think you're incredible, too; incredibly nice. Joel, could I have one of those heavenly little biscuits?"

"Lady, here's the plate. Anyone that talks that way to my child bride is welcome to the shirt off my back.

Massa Baird, sir, I'll trouble you to reach me a good thumping snack of what looks like the king of all chicken mousses."

"Oh, children, we can't eat like this!" protested Lindy in tones divided between horror and mirth. "Even the March Hares ought to have some method in their madness! If Joel corrupts anyone else to his underhand methods, it's going to be a plain case of the survival of the fittest. Kit, you and Doug come to my table, and the rest of you sit down firmly wherever you want to, only do let it be at tables. Look how beautiful they are! Sherry, stop shaking that thing—are you going to go on being Ganymede all night?"

"Hey, wait a minute!" commanded Trudi in stricken tones. "Hold everything! This party's off as far as I'm concerned. There isn't any coffee, and not one mouthful of food passes my lips without coffee. It's an old family tradition—I took an oath on the day I attained my majority, and I'm not liable to break it to-night. Whose job was coffee, anyway?"

"Mine," said Jill guiltily. "Oh, Trudi, I am so sorry. I unpacked the percolator and got it all ready—the only thing that I forgot was to light it! Look, if I start it now, it will be ready for demi-tasses almost as soon as we are. Larry, give me a match."

"Demi-tasses my eye! Coffee with my meals is what I said, and coffee with my meals is what I'll have, thank you. What's the hurry about this party, anyway? The night's young, isn't it? And we're young, aren't we? Pretty darned young, if you ask me. We'll just all lean back and investigate whether a watched pot boils. You might while away the time by giving us the family murder in your own inimitable way, Lindy love!"

"Oh, there won't be time!" protested Lindy. "It's

frightfully long, and everyone will start being fretful and starving before we're half through. The coffee won't take long."

"Won't it, indeed? You'll have time for a good long murder story and one of the minor epics before that stuff's fit to drink. Black as hate, sweet as love, and strong as hell—that's how we Spaniards take it, and I don't want any more insubordination out of the rest of you. Put on another log, Kit. Hanna, stop prowling around. It makes me nervous, and it isn't going to do you a particle of good. Sink to rest, everyone."

"A murder story?" inquired Ray feebly. "I thought you said it was a ghost story?"

"Murder *and* ghost," said Trudi, unrelenting. "A not unnatural sequence, my child. You may fire when ready, Lindy."

"But you've all heard it so many times!" protested Lindy drowsily. "Even ghosts get tiresome if they're too persistent. Besides, this isn't a real ghost—no one ever sees it."

Ray's small, impertinent face, wan beneath its freckles, was suddenly luminous with relief.

"Well, *that's* something to be thankful for!" she remarked devoutly. "Glory, I've been scooting down corridors and scampering around corners ever since Trudi brought the subject up. If there's one word that I loathe more than another in the English language, it's 'ghost.' Why didn't you tell me that it never bothered anyone, Trudi?"

"Because I'm a truthful girl, I am," said Trudi virtuously. "There are those that it has bothered to the extreme outer edge of fits and vapours. Do you remember how you carried on the first time you heard it, Chatty?"

"*Heard* it?" demanded the petrified Ray. "How d'you mean, heard it? What does it do?"

"Laughs," said Trudi briskly. "That doesn't sound anything to turn your hair white, does it? Nice and quiet and soft, too—not loud enough to worry a kitten. But then, of course, some of us aren't kittens."

"Laughs?" echoed Ray, incredulity struggling with despair. "You're making up. Joel Hardy, you never told me one single, solitary word about any of this! And what's more, I don't believe it; he's just told you what a coward I am, and you're all kidding me."

"I didn't tell you, because I knew I'd have about as much chance of luring you into spending three nights in a pest house as in a haunted house," admitted her husband with disarming candour. "Don't be a little goop, darling; what do you care if ghosts have a sense of humour?"

Gavin Dart inquired pleasantly from the love-seat near the fire, "But it was more than a ghost story that you promised us, surely? It was a murder story, and I'm rather a connoisseur in murder. I have the best collection of Nineteenth Century trials in the country, I believe."

"Honest to God, have you?" demanded Joel. "Goodnight, I didn't know that. I'm a nut about it, too, though I go in more for detective stuff than trials. I know every way to bump a guy off that was ever invented, and I've thought of two new ones."

"You're to be congratulated. I'm not an expert on the literary side; reality's so much more brutally melodramatic than fiction that I don't go in much for anything else. I confine my major activities to the police courts."

"Well, this place ought to suit you right down to the

ground," commented Joel proudly. "Unless you're the victim or the coroner, you'll never be much nearer the scene of the crime than you are this minute. If you turn your head about two inches, your eyes will encounter X, which marks the spot where the body fell."

"Here?" demanded Ray in stricken tones. "Here in this room? Where we're sitting?"

Lindy smiled faintly from her firelit corner.

"I'm afraid so. Where some of you are sitting, at any rate. Sidney's knee-hole desk was right in front of the fire, if legend can be trusted—just about where the big sofa is now."

Ray, with a frenzied squeak of protest, hurled herself straight from her corner of the sofa into Joel's arms, where she was greeted with patronizing but benign murmurs of reassurance. The other tenants of the sofa, Kit and Larry, exchanged tolerantly superior grins and stretched their legs at more luxurious angles.

"Was it Sidney who was murdered?" inquired Gavin Dart, amiable but undeterred.

"Yes, it was Sidney—such a beautiful young man," murmured Lindy drowsily, leaning her cheek against the soft brocade cushions. "He wore a scarlet coat and a little white wig and an unholy smile in the corner of his eye; I fell in love with him when I was six and a second, and even now that I know him for a graceless scamp and rogue, I love him just a little. Aunt Serena has the portrait; it hangs over the mantel in the white dining room—there's lace at his wrists and his eyes mock you from every corner of the room. . . . He was my great, great, great, great grandfather, and a colonel in His Majesty's forces."

"And it's he who goes laughing around Lady Court on dark nights?"

"Oh, no!" murmured Lindy. "I hardly think it's Sidney; it was he who was murdered, you see, and I imagine that, like Queen Victoria, he was not amused."

"Then who's our ghost?"

Lindy, her dark eyes sweeping Ray's pallid countenance, said lightly, "My own opinion is that it's a choked rain-gutter, or Trudi in her more unprincipled moments. I know that the perfect hostess ought to be loyal to her own ghosts, but if you'll listen to Trudi carefully after she's said something that she thinks is particularly amusing—that hollow, blood-curdling little laugh she gives——"

"Hey!" protested the outraged Trudi vigorously. "Are you making a ghoul out of me just because you want that Hardy child to have a pleasant night? I can bring eight thousand witnesses to prove that I've never been known to as much as smile after midnight, let alone laugh. You know damn well this house is haunted."

"Never mind the ghost," said Gavin Dart pacifically. "The murder will do excellently. Who did His Majesty's colonel in, Lindy?"

"Ah, that's it. I told you that it was a good murder story, didn't I? And did you ever hear of a good murder story without a mystery? This one has sixteen or seventeen. . . . For a long time everyone thought that it was a runaway slave; Sidney wasn't a very nice young man, and if he thought that a slave was getting a little slack or rebellious, he was apt to tie him up by his thumbs until he felt docile and energetic again. At least that's what Aunt Chloe's granny told her—she wasn't a Pallisser herself, of course, and she may have been wronging him cruelly. And it was true that a week or so before the murder two Negroes escaped, and there were

rumours that they were hiding in the pine woods north of Lady Court—and one of the long windows out behind the cold room was open. . . . But they turned up as stowaways six weeks later on a boat that had sailed for the Indies the day before Sidney was murdered, and by that time everyone was off hot-foot on another trail."

"You haven't even told us how he was killed yet," interpolated the connoisseur on murder, a shade reproachfully.

"Haven't I? He was stabbed—in the back of the neck. Someone must have crept up behind him while he was sitting at the writing table. He was facing the fire, you see, with his back to the rest of the room."

"Was he writing?"

"Now you've found another mystery, Gavin. There was a quill pen on the floor beside him, and even a few grains of sand on the desk, as though he had been shaking some out to dry the ink, but there wasn't a single solitary sheet of paper on the desk. Quite a packet of it in the drawer, of course, and the people who found him finally decided that he must have been about to start writing, and had bent over to get a sheet from the drawer, perhaps. The sand might perfectly well have been left from another time."

"With a lot of nigger slaves that got strung up by the toes any time they went slack?" Joel shoved the still palpitant Ray somewhat unchivalrously aside in his contemptuous excitement. "Swell chance! No, sir—the boy that stabbed Sidney was after something he was writing; and any little drops of ink or little grains of sand around the place ought to have told even old Dr. Watson himself that the boy got it."

"Surely that's obvious." Dart's fine, shrewd face

was riveted in amused attention. "Now, Hardy, dive again into the deep well of your criminal knowledge and bring us up that reluctant lady, Truth. What was this essential document that turned Death from a horror to a solution?"

"Oh, a will, in all probability." The buoyant voice of Monsieur Le Coq's disciple was self-confidence made articulate. "Or a disclosure of some kind that meant someone's ruin. Or mayhap the noble lord was going in for a little nice lucrative blackmail. D'you happen to know what the state of the family fortune was in those days, Lindy?"

"Oh, Sidney was magnificently rich. He'd been wealthy even before he married Damaris Fane, and she brought him another fortune."

"Then why in the world did he desert England?"

"The family annals are just a trifle reticent about that, Joel dear, but I gather from vague allusions that Sidney was a famous duellist, and fought just one duel too many, with such fatal consequences that His Majesty decided that the safest place for His Majesty's servant was His Majesty's colony—and Sidney evidently agreed with him. He only waited long enough to marry Damaris before he left. This house was his wedding present to her; he had it copied exactly from her childhood home in Devon, even to the Chinese porcelain on the table, and the clove pinks in the box garden, and the silver altar in the chapel."

"Have you honestly got a chapel?" Ray's eyes were round with awe.

"Indeed we have a chapel—a perfectly divine one, all rose-coloured marble from Italy. That door to the right of the fireplace leads into it, and there's another door to the left of the altar into the servants' quarters, so

that they could all troop respectfully in by the back corridors without coming through here."

"A chapel!" murmured Ray solemnly. "I didn't know that anyone in the world had chapels except Catharine de' Medici and the Pope."

"Oh, lots of the Maryland families had them: Damaris was very devout, and she brought a priest over with her. He lived for twenty years in the room over the chapel that I'm using now. You must see that to-morrow, too; it has really lovely pine panelling. . . . But I doubt whether even the chapel consoled poor Damaris for her lost Devon. Aunt Chloe has the diary that she kept the first year after she came here; it's written in the loveliest, featheriest little hand, and on the first page it tells how they arrived late on a spring night to find that the road that the bottle-green coach drove up was lined on either side for half a mile with slaves standing like black statues with torches in their hands, and that every window in the house had three wax tapers burning in it. She said that she stood there on the portico in the darkness, watching those strange bright torches flaring against the strange dark faces, and wept for lost England, and the white hawthorn hedges, and the little spaniel that had died of terror in her arms on the terrible sea that lay between them and home. She had been seventeen in April—and it was May, and all the old world had vanished clean away and left her with a dark stranger at her side."

"Didn't she love him?" asked Chatty wonderingly from the shadows.

"Oh," said Lindy softly, "I think she must have loved him very much. Only think, in all her seventeen years she had never been more than a morning's length from her father's gardens, and because a stranger smiled

at her and kissed her hands and pinned a rose in her laces, she left its lovely safety, and followed him for forty days and forty nights into a strange land filled with blackamoors and Indians and beasts that hadn't set hoof in England since the Gauls. I think she must have loved him very much indeed."

"Jinny Carewe saw her portrait in Richmond at your Aunt Chloe's," said Chatty. "And she said it looked enough like you to be your sister—yes, and your twin sister."

"Ah, but she didn't, really. I'm quite dark, you know, and Damaris's hair was deep gold, almost like amber. She never wore powder on it, and it grew down on her forehead in a little peak; in the portrait she has a black patch just at the corner of her mouth, and I'm sure that she put it there to hide a dimple; she looks demure and decorous enough for a schoolmistress instead of a minx of sixteen! Her waist was small enough for a fairy, and her silver brocade skirts went spreading out—wider, wider, wider than the frame could hold. She really must have been bewitching."

"Jinny said she was the very image of you," repeated Chatty staunchly.

"Oh, well, her eyes are a little like mine, perhaps. In the portrait they look quite black, and mine are, too, of course. Aunt Chloe probably did her best to make Jinny think so; she simply loved to run on forever about the hands and wrists, and the brow and the mouth. . . . The artist who did the portrait put a red rose in her hand and matched her lips to it exactly—the warmest, brightest, deepest red, fresher than any roses that grow nowadays. Aunt Chloe's a maniac about family likenesses; she was a great belle in Richmond when she was a girl, you see, and there was an immense to-do

about how she had the Pallisser hands and mouth. I suppose it makes old people feel immortal to think that long after they're dead someone will be left to laugh with their lips and see with their eyes. . . . It's always the old ones, isn't it, who hang over the baby and say, 'Oh, my dear, he's a Pallisser all over—look at that smile.' They see a safe eternity in that smile; it warms their poor old bones to think of it going down the years. Their very own smile! . . . I don't really look like Damaris; I wish to heaven that I did."

Gavin Dart said courteously in his pleasant voice, "I fancy that flattery will reach her even in heaven. She must have been a lucky lady to have Lindy's eyes. But where is our murder?"

Lindy, smiling her thanks from the velvet eyes, shook her head with the lightest of sighs.

"Oh, that was long after—seven years. Don't you think it's pleasanter to leave her standing there in the spring night with the dark hood of her travelling cloak pulled over her bright hair, and four tiring women waiting to put her to bed between cool sheets? The woman called Prim had the silver cage with the nightingale in it, and the one called Audrey had the gold one with the lark. Tibby had a little red morocco trunk full of jewels, and Joan had a little green one full of elder-flower water and gilliflower water and a cream that smelled of lilies for her hands and a cream that smelled of roses for her lips. They loved her and took care of her till she died. . . . Let's leave her there with them."

"Was she so unhappy later?"

"Unhappy? Oh, no, dreadfully happy. For a long time she had everything, you see: Lady Court and Sidney and the finest rose garden in all the colonies, and

gowns for every day in the year and two for holidays, and two children beautiful as dreams, with hair as gold as hers and eyes as gay as his. What more could any lady want? I think her dreams by day were sweeter than her dreams at night."

Ray said with a small, uneasy laugh, her fingers tightening about Joel's, "You talk exactly as though you knew her."

"Ah, but I do know her! Better than I know anyone alive, I assure you. You see, I spent all my summers with Aunt Chloe when I was little, and Damaris was my playmate. In the attic there were two great round-topped horsehair trunks full of her clothes, and a fat little one studded with brass nails that spilled over where you opened it, it was so gorged with letters and diaries and account books and commonplace books in that feathery hand of hers. . . . I knew that at Whitsuntide Damaris had a new taffety gown that changed from blue to green, and at Epiphany a holly-red pelisse lined with sables just off the French packet with a tiny muff to match to hide her hands in and boots fur-lined to warm her feet when she rode abroad in the bottle-green coach. She had the most heavenly, heavenly clothes . . . but after Sidney died at his desk she wore black to the day of her death."

"So Sidney died at his desk, did he?" murmured Gavin Dart encouragingly. But Lindy did not hear him —she was back in the apple-scented attic at Richmond, with Damaris Pallisser's papers fast in small reverent hands.

"I know the first word that little Humphrey said . . . it was 'star.' I don't know the first word that your Jeffrey said, Hanna. I know that she could never remember how to spell 'lily'—I've forgotten how you spell it,

Chatty. . . . It was Damaris who taught me what to do for bee stings, and vapours and heaviness in the head—she taught me how to make sugar wafers and syllabub and flip, how to cool a fever and tune a lute. . . . You taught me half my lessons and all my manners, Jill, but you never taught me how to tune a lute."

Jill, her face still flushed with enchantment, smiled at her joyously.

"Oh, Lindy, I never taught you anything at all! That was nothing but sheer nonsense manufactured by you and Sunny. . . ." Her voice faltered and fell abruptly to silence, tripped by the beloved and forbidden name.

"You taught us more than any teacher we ever had," said Lindy, her own voice schooled to soft and deliberate gayety. "D'you remember the spring that I was sixteen and school was closed for ten whole weeks because of that typhoid epidemic? Children, I give you my word of honour that even when both of us were absolutely wobbling on our feet with sleep, she'd keep us out of our own beautiful beds until we'd recited every last mortal word of the lessons for the day! Many's the night we sat there propping up our eyelashes with our fingers, trying to remember the Carlovingian dynasties and the boundaries of Ecuador."

"Lindy, you are the most frightful fibber! You make me sound like a cross between one of the knitting women of Paris and a school-dame—and thirty-five years older than you at least."

"You were thirty-five years wiser," said Lindy, grave and sweet. "You knew everything: the distance from the earth to the moon and the distance from Lisbon to Rio; how many pennies made a florin and how many men made a legion; who was Pope when Dante was a

little boy, and who was King when Whittington's cat came to London—there wasn't anything in the world that you couldn't tell us without once looking in the back of the book, and we worshipped the ground that you walked on. You needn't shake your head—you know that we did, Jill."

"I'll shake my head until you can hear the brains rattle around it," protested Jill, frowning through her laughter. "Lindy, it's wicked of you. I wasn't even eighteen——"

"You were almost eighteen and we weren't nearly seventeen. Such lovely days. . . ." murmured Lindy, her dreaming eyes on the fire. "Oh, Jill—oh, Jill, I wish that you weren't quite eighteen again and that we weren't nearly seventeen."

"I wish it, too," whispered Jill, and caught Larry's eyes and cried, tripping in her eagerness to atone, "This—this is lovely, too!"

"It is rather lovely." Lindy's eyes swept the shadowed beauty of the room in delicate approval. "It's good to sit here, warm and safe and happy, like good, good children, listening to the storm trying to pry its way in and knowing that it can't touch even the tips of our fingers. Put another log on the fire, Kit, and let's have another song."

"But, hostess, hostess, you've absolutely forgotten something." Dart's eyes, amused and accusing, laughed at her through the shadows.

"Hanna, is he always so abominably persistent? Look, that coffee's ready, isn't it? I didn't forget for a moment—but music's pleasanter than murder, isn't it, Ray?"

"If you're asking me," said Ray forlornly, "anything in God's world is better than murder, except ghosts.

But don't let me spoil anyone's fun. I'm apparently the albatross around this party's neck."

"Ray," said Joel sternly, "listen to me. If there's one more squeak out of you, I'll tip you up over my knee and give you something to cry about. It's the last party I bring you to till the day you die; I'm extremely sorry that I ever thought of marrying you. Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for her copiously. She's my sorrow and my shame, and if I weren't afraid that she'd cry, I'd make it stronger. Tell 'em you're sorry, Ray, before I open that window and heave you right spang out into the graveyard."

"I'm sorry," said Ray solemnly. "I'm frightfully sorry. I've been acting like an addle-pated little donkey. I'm not usually so despicable, honestly; I don't know what got into me, unless it's that storm. Lindy, please finish the story—please. If you don't, I swear I'll go out there and dash my brains out against the first headstone I come to."

"But there's hardly any more to tell, truly, and I know you're all starved. The last person that saw him alive was the housekeeper who came in at about eleven to see if he needed more tapers or wood for the fire. The fire was burning clear and bright, and Sidney was in a deep chair close to it, with a flask of port and some biscuits at his elbow, and a book on his knee. He said nothing about writing, but ordered that the household might retire, as Damaris had withdrawn some time since, and he was about to follow shortly. There were no other occupants of the master-bedrooms that night except little Humphrey and Pam and their attendant, as the priest had gone two days before to give unction to a girl who lay dying of a fever forty miles away to the north. There had been rumours of the slaves in hid-

ing in the pinewoods, however, and Damaris was terrified for Sidney's safety, and had a new bolt put on the bedroom door and their most trusted slave to lie across its threshold. Zeke Dorro was under orders not to close his eyes until the break of dawn, when he would be relieved by another. His tale was that at shortly after ten his mistress mounted to her room, escorted by his master. He rose and stood aside to let them pass and they entered the room, closing the door behind them."

"And just how do you know they closed the door behind them, Lindy Marsden?" demanded the still pallid Ray, resolutely skeptical.

"Oh, Zeke's deposition was in the leather trunk, with about half a dozen others. They had enough red sealing wax on them to set up a notary public." She unlinked her hands, and turned dark inquiring eyes on Gavin Dart. "Do I have to go on?"

"Unless you're prepared for another murder!"

"Well, a few minutes later a bell rang, and Prim, the first tiring maid, came running. Sidney himself opened the door and said, 'Your mistress has been troubled with evil dreams these past nights, and is in need of sleep; send Prim for a cup of hot posset, and I'll add drops against wakefulness. Summon likewise Joan and Audrey to make her ready.' Lindy lifted a slim evocatory hand and suddenly the long corridors of Lady Court were filled with the hurrying feet of the tiring maids, docile and zealous. "Zeke said that in a minute or so Prim came hastening back with Joan and Audrey at her heels, bearing a silver porringer with the posset and array for the night. Sidney tarried only a moment, but at the threshold turned to say to his lady, 'I'll not be long. Dream sweet.' A few minutes later the tiring maids came out, closing the door fast, and before its

echo had died the room within was darkened. Zeke stretched again across the threshold to wait for Sidney's return. He lay long, hearing the clock in the hall chime eleven, then the half hour, midnight, and again the half hour, and gradually he became filled with a growing sense of unease. The house was still as death—not a whisper, not a footfall, not even the comfortable rise and fall of human breath. He remembered that Sidney had said that he would not be long, he remembered, too, the runaway slaves—and suddenly he was afraid. The clock struck one; he rose to his feet, and went down the stairs, across the hall, into this room. . . . Sidney was seated before his desk, with his head fallen forward on his arms. The fire was out, the candles had burnt low, but there was light enough to see the dark stain that spread down the dove-gray coat from silver-broidered collar to silver-broidered skirts. . . . He was dead as the little spaniel that Damaris brought from England. . . ." Lindy sat silent for a moment, her eyes on the dying fire, still flickering vaguely over its nest of golden embers—then, turning swiftly, broke the agreeably horrified silence.

"And that was the end of my beautiful Sidney. Now please, please, let's have supper, children; it's getting frightfully late!"

"Lindy, you abominable little cheat, you know perfectly well that you've left out every last thing that matters!" Joel's voice was loud and fierce in his righteous indignation. "How about Mistress Nell Denry? How about the packet of letters? How about Humphrey's wedding eve? You finish this story and finish it right, or I'll have the law on you, and wind it up myself into the bargain."

"Oh, Joel, you're such a baby!" He grinned back,

unrepentant, at the soft, indulgent mockery. "Very well, but if we don't hurry we'll never in this world get on with the Hallowe'en rites before All Hallowe'en is over. We'll be playing Hide in the Dark at breakfast instead of midnight. From now on you'll get no nice colourful details out of me. . . . Three weeks after Sidney's death, while they were still taking depositions and beating the pinewoods for the runaway slaves, Mistress Nell Denry, the pretty wife of Roderick Denry, owner of the great estate of Far Fields, three miles to the west of Lady Court, kissed her husband good-night, went quietly to her bed, opened the veins in both her wrists, and died smiling, without a sound. Under her frilled pillow they found a packet of letters in Sidney Pallisser's hand, swearing eternal love, and hinting at flight to France. . . . The whole countryside promptly turned on Denry, accusing him of Sidney's death; but when the smoke cleared away it was proved that he'd sat at cards till dawn on the night of the murder, with a party of gentlemen from Baltimore."

"Was the hired assassin entirely unknown in those days?" inquired Dart amiably.

"Oh, well and favourably known, I've no doubt! Still, nothing was ever proved against poor Denry, who was an honest and pleasant gentleman, greatly loved by all who knew him, except the luckless Nell. . . . No one ever told Damaris how or why Nell Denry died. Those about her had already feared for her reason; she would neither sleep, nor eat, nor weep, nor pray—she hung herself in black from brow to heel, and dressed Humphrey, who was five and Pam, who was four, in weeds as dark as hers—and whipped them if they so much as smiled or lifted their small voices over a whisper. All day and all night she would sit at her window,

watching the road down which Sidney used to ride, brave in his gold-laced coat on his great black horse. . . . Day after day, week after week, month after month, she sat, white as a small marble statue in her black veils, shedding no tear, making no sound after the one great cry that she gave when they told her that he was dead. Only, at night, those who slept in that wing—Prim who had been placed by the doctors in the room to her right, Father Fabian who slept in the pine room to her left, Dame Donne, down the hall next to the children in the Blue Room—would start awake, shaken by a sound from the still room in which Damaris kept vigil. An incredible and terrifying sound: the sound of laughter, soft and merry. Then they would turn on their pillows, crossing themselves, and praying that madness might lift its hand from their lady. . . . You'll all be glad to know that their prayers were answered. After a year Damaris ceased to laugh in the night and smiled again in the day. Humphrey and Pam sang in the sun again, free of the dark nightmare, and peace came back to Lady Court, though Damaris went in black until the day she died, twelve years later. . . . She left all of her jewels and furs and laces and half her great estate to little Pam for her dowry; and the other half and a little ivory box inlaid with coral to her son Humphrey, to be opened on his wedding eve. Humphrey married when he was twenty, a pretty, dark-haired little thing from New Orleans, and on the night before his wedding he opened the little box in Damaris's old room. It held a little packet of three letters, with Nell Denry's name at the foot of each—and beneath the packet two sheets of paper, and at their foot no name at all. As a matter of fact, something must have interrupted the writer; in the midst of a sentence giving the sailing dates of the

packets bound for France, it broke off with a long, shaken scrawl and spatter of ink. The letter was in Sidney Pallisser's fine tall hand, and it began, 'Heart's Delight.'"

After a long moment of silence, Ray Hardy demanded in a small voice of stupor:

"Well, but—well, but—was that the letter that Sidney was writing?"

Lindy, smiling inscrutably in the shadows, shook her head.

"I never was any good at mathematics. What do two and two make, Joel?"

"Of course it was the letter, you little nut." Joel eyed his spouse's blank countenance with undisguised diversion. "And while your mind's plunging ahead at this terrific pace, I'll give you exactly three guesses as to who the ghost is who goes wandering around the house between midnight and dawn, laughing its wicked little head off."

"Do you mean to tell me that those other three letters were from Nell to Damaris, giving away the whole blooming show?"

"No, no, there was no name on them to show whom they were written to, but as they each began 'Beloved' I hardly think they were intended for Damaris."

"You mean she stole them?"

"Oh, Ray, I'm sure that two and two almost never make five! There were a dozen ways that Damaris might have got those letters without stealing them. Suppose that the messenger had brought them to her instead of Sidney, hoping for better pay; suppose that Denry intercepted them and sent them to her; suppose that Sidney gave them to her himself or forgot to destroy them, and left her to discover them after his

death? Why do you want to turn my Damaris into a common spy and thief?"

"I know perfectly well that I'm a donkey nine times out of ten," remarked Ray gloomily. "But this happens to be the tenth time. How about that unfinished letter? Did Sidney turn that over to her?"

"You're all so appallingly inquisitive," sighed Lindy, perching herself on the arm of the great sofa. "There's probably a perfectly simple explanation, if we only knew it. . . . Are we going to sit right here for the rest of the night, children?"

"So that's the solution," said Gavin Dart thoughtfully. "And your lovely Damaris wore black till the day she died, did she? What a really remarkable young woman! I suppose that any jury in these stirring days would hand her back to her golden-headed infants with tears and a blessing."

"Jury?" repeated Ray in dazed tones. "Why should a jury—Lindy Marsden, you aren't sitting there telling us that your great, great, great, great grandmother murdered her own husband?"

"Oh, Ray, who in the whole wide world told you that? Not I—not ever. There's always been a feud in the Pallisser family as to who did kill our most romantic ancestor, and when the family deserted Lady Court and the things were divided up, Aunt Serena's father took Sidney's portrait and all his possessions and installed them in the Baltimore house, and Aunt Chloe's mother took Damaris to Richmond and hung her over the mantel, and filled the attic with her trunks. My aunts took turns bringing me up, after Daddy and Mother were killed in that train accident, and I always used to leave Baltimore convinced that Sidney was a martyred victim and come back sure that Damaris was

the martyr. Aunt Chloe always insisted she was a vastly maligned lady of impeccable conduct, and that I owed her a debt of gratitude for bequeathing me her hands."

"Here's the lad to say you do!" concurred Doug King gayly from the chair at her side. "Prettiest hands since Damaris died! Lindy chile, dat ole story done soun' better dan it do ten years ago, an' ole Uncle Doug he know what he say. You suah are de beatinest story-teller either side de Mason-Dixon line."

"I've told it so often," said Lindy dreamily, "that it doesn't sound true to me any more—you know, the way quite a simple word begins to sound fantastic if you say it over twenty or thirty times. Damaris and Sidney feel more like my own inventions than my own ancestors. . . . Anyway, there's a posthumous happy ending. Humphrey was so impressed by the contents of the ivory and coral box that he and his Ninon lived happy ever after. They never spent four hours apart in all their lives, and celebrated their golden wedding with thirty-two grandchildren to toast their success. So do, do let's get at supper and forget the errors—let's say of judgment—of my unlucky ancestors."

"All's well that ends well, what?" inquired Joel jubilantly. "Nothing like a good murder in the family to insure fidelity for generations to come! Don't you go putting ideas into Ray's blessed little empty nut, Lindy love."

"One more round, Lindy!" implored Doug. "One more because this is a party, and we're the March Hares. We ought to drink to the Queen, God Rest Her Soul, and scrunch the glasses under our heels—how about some good old Victorian glass scrunching, boys? This is Liberty Hall, isn't it, Lindy? Or is it Lady

Court? You never can tell about these places—sometimes it's one thing and sometimes it's another."

"It's Lady Court," said Lindy with surprising firmness. "And its inhabitants are now rapidly approaching the end of the 'Wassail,' 'Lebewohl,' 'Hoch,' 'Skoal,' and heel-taps period. When you start chattering about glass-scrunching, Doug, I doubt whether we're approaching it rapidly enough! This is good though, Sherry. Here's to my guests—bless them for being here!"

"Here's to our hostess—bless her for having us! On your feet, March Hares—strike up the band!

"'Oh, what is the thing
That maddens our brain?'"

Doug's plaintive bellow echoed to the ceiling, drowning the wind itself—

"'That brings to our life
Both sorrow and pain?
And last but not least
That drives us insane?'"

"You tell 'em, boys! All together, now—

"'Wilson's whiskey—that's a-all!
Wilson's whiskey—that's all!'"

Even Hanna the sedate and Jill the demure were on their feet, beating time to the idiotically infectious swing with a zeal worthy of a better tune. As for Douglas the irrepressible, he whooped, he howled, he pranced, he executed intricate little jig steps and abortive cadenzas with the abandon of a whirling dervish and a Pawnee Indian. It was a really memorable performance.

"Now we're all up, boys and girls, how about a dance? Just one, Lindy, because the night is young and so are we! The lights—the lights, and the music—that's us all over, isn't it? Just look at that old music box standing up on its hind legs rarin' to go; all right, old timer—you and me both! Do your stuff, boy; let's go!" He spun the handle, gave a professional twirl to the black disk, and stepped back with a magnificent gesture of invitation.

"Boy, listen to that! They don't write music like that these days. 'Underneath the stars'—ta da da, dee da—da! This is ours, Lindy; here's where we teach 'em how to dance!"

Lindy, her eyes black pools in the white terror of her face, pressed back against the sofa.

"No, no, Doug; I'm tired. No!"

"Chile, I don't even know how to spell 'no.' Come on, show this gawking crowd what the poetry of motion means. Attagirl! 'Jack-o'-lanterns in the garden glea-eaming—'"

No one stirred—no one moved—they stood transfixed, the glasses still in their hands, the candlelight in their hair, the music of Sunny's tune rising and falling about them as Doug swung by with Lindy in his arms. Swaying, circling, dipping to the old unforgotten tune—the old unforgotten words—

"Underneath the silver . . ."

It checked, wavered, and swung off into space with a long rasping cry as Kit Baird pushed the lever ruthlessly across the still spinning disk, and stood staring down at the scar that it left in its wake. In the far corner of the room Doug King flung about on his heel.

"Who did that? You, Baird?"

"I myself—in person," said Kit Baird, his eyes still on the disk.

"It's the second time that you've done it," said Douglas King. "And if you're asking me, it's twice too often."

At that Kit raised his eyes, and they were smiling.

"Do you know, for a moment I almost thought you'd forgotten." He came forward through the little group with his long, light step, his eyes still smiling. When he was a pace away, he stopped and dropped one gentle, detaining hand on Doug King's shoulder. "Your mistake, old man. Didn't you hear her say that she was tired?"

III

In the silence that had fallen abruptly and appallingly over the great room, a strange voice rose, a voice thickened and coarsened beyond recognition.

"Take your hand off my arm, you——"

There was a small crash of splintering glass as Joel Hardy moved swiftly forward.

"Steady on there, King. This isn't a tavern."

Lindy, swaying very slightly, steadied herself by catching at Doug's free arm. She slipped her hand through it, smiling desperately up at him, and at the look in her eyes Kit relaxed his grip abruptly and stood aside.

"Doug, please—it's my fault; I signed to Kit to do it, because I didn't feel as though I could dance—truly, I was so tired. This is my party, Doug—you aren't going to spoil my party? Kit, I do think that was rather rude."

Kit, his eyes never leaving her face, said carelessly and pleasantly, "It begins to look as though none of us will make the third grade! Joel, if you'll just trundle up the kiddie car, I'll take a whirl or so on it before we all settle down to porridge and milk and a good rousing game of Ring Around a Rosy. Or must I stand in the corner, Lindy?"

"Not this time." Lindy's caressing voice was resolutely light. "Suppose you sit over there with Joel and Chatty, and we all get at the porridge? Doug, you come

over here with Hanna and me—you, too, Sherry. Oh, no, Doug has to carve first—he's the butcher. The ham's in that little hamper there. . . . Doug, I'm afraid to look at you—are you still scowling?"

"Nary scowl, angel—not with you at my side." He bestowed a reassuring pat on the hand resting so lightly on his arm, and swung a jovial beam about the still transfixed circle. "Let's have a look at this ham. Gr-reat suffering cats, look at that ham!" His voice rose in a mighty diapason as he swung aloft a small mountain of glistening brown.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" Lindy, still at his side, eyed it with benign modesty, as became a hostess. "Mandy feeds them for months on nothing but oysters and acorns and corn meal with cream, and then when—when the inevitable has transpired, she cooks them in cider with peach brandy, and bakes them with that crust of brown sugar and walnuts. She claims it makes right good ham."

"Right good ham!" howled the frenzied Douglas. "Here, give me a knife, someone! If I have to wait three minutes longer to get at this I'm a dead man."

"There's one with the rest of the silver in that cabinet—no, the left-hand corner."

"This dinky thing? I don't want to cut butter. I'm after ham."

"But, Doug, what on earth is the matter with it? Isn't it sharp enough?"

"It's sharp enough, Beautiful, but what I want is a carving knife, not an *objet d'art*. You can turn this over to the boy scouts. I'm a man, I am, and I wants a man's knife, I do!"

"Doug, you're driving me straight out of my senses," said Trudi, scowling ferociously at him across the ham.

"For the love of Pete, get one out of the kitchen and carve that ham. You'd better take one of those candles —it'll be black as Egypt out there."

"Coming to show me where the knives live, Lindy love?"

"They're in the cabinet to the left of the stove; you can't possibly miss them. And I really have to get these tables in order, if we're going to have supper before midnight. Yes, that way, the second door—— Oh, Larry, look out—there goes that window!"

Larry caught it just in time to save the flickering candles, and from somewhere far down the corridor through which Doug was disappearing, a door banged an answer, and another door, farther away still, echoed it with feeble violence.

Larry, flushed and panting from his struggle, turned a rain-spattered countenance back to the reassuring warmth of the fire, stopping to wring out a rain-soaked cuff.

"Gosh, what a night!" He laughed with all the curious hilarity that a struggle with the elements engenders. "It's blowing a fair gale and raining like the last day of the Deluge. Any of the other windows liable to do that, Lindy?"

"No, that's my fault. Kit and I opened it to see what kind of a night it was, and evidently we didn't make a distinguished success of closing it. . . . There was a red streak over the cedars, and Kit said then it meant trouble."

"Go to the head of the weather-prophet class, Kit! Where do I put these things, lady?"

"The cabbage salad goes with the ham, as soon as Doug decides to carve it. You serve it, will you, Chatty? And those biscuits stuffed with bacon and the cheese

straws ought to be hot—stick the platters down by the fire, Kit; we can fish them up later. Oh, thank goodness, Doug—we thought you were lost! Why in the world did you come back through the chapel?"

"Thought I was lost?" inquired Doug, flourishing his carving knife in menacing circles. "You knew darned well I was lost. Why didn't anyone come after me? Lindy, you're the only girl I ever loved—where were you?"

"Playing Penelope. Brandish that at the ham, will you? Chatty, you come over here."

"My candle went out round the very first corner," continued Doug in a plaintive bellow. "And I fell three times down the coal hole and once into the ice-box. I nearly died—not that any of you care."

"I care," said Joel Hardy, with prompt fervour. "I care terribly that it was only nearly. If you'd only broken that thick head of yours, someone else could have a go at the ham. For God's sake, carve!"

"That Hardy guy doesn't like me," said Doug darkly. "He never did like me. He can't bear me because I'm better-looking than he is, and funnier, too. . . . I came in that way, Lindy, if it still interests you, because I got lost just outside the butler's pantry and took the wrong turn and fell three stairs down into the chapel and three stairs up into here. You don't mind, do you?"

"Poor Doug, of course I mind. That hamper has dessert in it, Trudi—crullers and apples to roast on sticks. The sticks must be in the closet. Doug, if you don't stop brooding over that ham——"

"Possibly he doesn't know how to carve it," suggested Gavin Dart amiably.

"Not know how to carve it? My dear fellow, when I die the art of carving ham dies with me. Step right up—

the line forms to the right to see how a born master handles his tools. There you are, sir—fragrant as a rose and transparent as stained glass. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"No, no, you're quite right." Dart watched the fragile slices curl back over the dextrous knife with a diverted and appraising eye. "That kind of skill gets out of the realms of talent into those of genius as far as I'm concerned. I'm every kind of dub with my hands."

"Oh, Doug can do anything with his hands," murmured Lindy. "He's a real magician. Thanks, that's plenty."

"Ah, yes," said Kit Baird pensively, "Doug certainly uses his hands to save his head. If a guy could get to be President of the United States by making coins drop out of the other fellow's ears and cards vanish from under his nose, Doug would win on the first ballot every time. And as for getting out of tight places, let me tell you now, the late Houdini has nothing on that boy—has he, Doug?"

Doug King eyed the blandly nonchalant countenance at his elbow with a certain curious fixity for a moment, and then grinned appreciatively.

"You ought to know, ole sport! You and me together, love! Double for me on that Scotch, Sherry, and no quits. Now, are we all set? Lindy, chile, Ah done gone an' save yo'-all a mighty fine li'l' slice off dat li'l' pig, as purty a li'l' slice as yo'-all is goin' to lay yo' shinin' eyes on dis whole endurin' night."

"If there's one thing that I like better than another about Doug," murmured Lindy with a shadowy smile, "it's that Boston accent. Move over, Chatty darling. He wants to sit next to you."

Ray remarked earnestly from the next table, "You

know that's exactly the way I thought you were going to talk. When Joel told me you were a Southerner I was perfectly sure that every other minute you'd be saying, 'Ah raickon' and 'honey, lamb' and 'you-all' and 'right sweet.' You know, the way you all do in books."

Even by the flickering candlelight an attentive observer might have seen the shadowy smile deepen, but Lindy remarked serenely in her voice of moonlit languor, "Did you? And when Joel told me that you were from Vermont, I could hardly wait for 'I callate' and 'I swan' and 'real spry.' And now not even a 'land's sake' to reward me! You aren't trying to high-hat us, are you, Ray?"

"Just you let that remark lie where it falls, duckie," advised Joel, who, contrary to etiquette and tradition, had seated himself firmly at his wife's side. "You're being kidded by experts! The little Southern lady is gently implying that ladies and gents talk like gents and ladies irregardless of the hoi polloi and equatorial distinctions. But don't you let anyone get snooty with you—a nice, courtly come-back for that last one is 'Oh, go jump in the lake.'"

Ray, slightly flushed but dauntlessly friendly, did not avail herself of it. She remarked cheerfully, "Don't mind me, anybody. It still surprises me what a donkey I can be, so no wonder that it comes as a slight shock to some of you! Those little furry things that you see just sticking out through my curls are the beginnings of nice long ears. If you'll give me one more chance, Lindy, I'll waggle 'em for you."

Lindy blew her an airy and contrite kiss through a haze of cigarette smoke.

"Joel, how did you ever find anyone so much nicer

than any of us? I wish I were at your table; Ray, I'm never going to get to know you well enough in three days. Anyway, we're all of us close enough to shout at each other."

Trudi remarked cavernously from the depths of the winged chair:

"I'm far too weak to shout—far. And I shouldn't dream of trying to pull up to a table, not while I can lie here in an agreeable coma consuming delicate and nutritious titbits. Jill, you don't want Larry and Gavin *and* Tom, do you? Well, then, suppose you send Gavin and Tom over here—I need someone to soothe my brow and another one to chafe my hands if I'm going to get through this evening. Just for the present you two boys can pretend that you're a pair of nice little blackamoors in red panties, busy as bees gathering honey for the Queen Mother. Well, I dunno—something a dash exaggerated about that. Bees in red panties—oh, well, let it ride! About seven more plates of that salad, I should say, and another pound or so of Doug's ham. And not another word out of anyone until I get my teeth into them; when I say, 'Go' you can all burst into song or dance or hysterical mirth, or anything that tends to divert and sustain me. Lindy, never in my born day did I eat anything to equal these biscuits!"

She caught the glance of rapt gratitude tossed her by Jill, safely isolated in the shadows with Larry by these skilful manœuvres, wagged her head at them in mocking admonition, and diverted the seemingly endless stream of her conversation toward the tranquil Hanna.

"Darling, don't those earrings give you megrims or something? I should think they'd double you right over; I don't believe they're healthy that size—you don't

think they're healthy, either, do you, Sherry? I'll say you don't! Still, I suppose you can get used to anything —like the Indian squaw toting around twin papooses. I hope to heaven they aren't real. Sherry, you hope they aren't real, too, don't you?"

"I know darn well they're real," said Sherry. "And you can't scare me by talking jewellery, either, young woman. The closest that Trudi ever came to wearing jewellery in her life was when she bought a dog collar for the Irish wolfhound. It's the only thing in God's world that she doesn't collect, though, from Chinese porcelains to Persian prints. And shoes! Boy, let me tell you that child spends enough for one shoe to keep a reasonable man in watches and chains for the rest of his life. She's got two hundred and forty-four pairs sitting around on their haunches in one closet. I could bear it better if they didn't look as though they all came out of the comic section. Look at those square-toed green things she's got on now!"

Trudi surveyed the derided objects with marked complacency, stretching her slender legs so that the others might share her gratification.

"And if you ask her why she hands out a hundred and sixty dollars for the little devils," commented Sherry, striving earnestly to look morose, "she'll tell you that they're a real bargain, because the skins come from a special kind of a green manchurian cat off the Gobi desert, and the buckles used to belong to Kubla Khan in person. I wish you'd get her to go in for something economical like diamonds, Hanna."

Lindy murmured, "Hanna has diamond shoe buckles. Gavin gave them to her for her birthday on the *Starling* last winter . . . you remember, Doug, it was just before we picked you up in Palm Beach. I was even more im-

pressed with Hanna's buckles than Gavin's yacht! I do know people who have yachts, but I never even heard of one with diamond shoe buckles. Chatty, will your table lend us some of those cheese things?"

"It was an absurd thing of Gavin to do," smiled Hanna. "But as his only extravagances are diamonds for me and sails for the *Starling*, we all conspire to humour him."

"Oh, Hanna, have you really got a yacht? With sails and sailors and cabins and decks and everything?" Chatty's eyes were pools of delight.

"Everything but a powder-monkey," proclaimed Doug with a spacious gesture. "'There are comfits in the cabin

> "'Sugar kisses in the hold—
> The sails are made of silk
> And the masts are made of gold.
> Go-wuld—go-wuld—the masts
> Are made of go-wuld!'

I could sing even better than that if Sherry would keep up his end of this party. Doesn't an empty glass remind you of anything, old comrade?"

Joel said, "Ask me! I'm the closest thing to a poet around here. Turn down an empty glass. Go ahead, Sherry; turn it down."

"Here's the bottle," said the genial Sherry. "Mix your own; I'm busy polishing this plate."

"Hanna, does it sail everywhere?" demanded the still enthralled Chatty. "Is Gavin the captain? Does he wear those queer patent-leather caps and look through little telescopes all the time? Oh, Lindy, were you on it? When were you on it?"

"We were cruising for almost four weeks, weren't we,

Hanna? After we picked up Doug and those nice Hammonds in Palm Beach, I mean."

"Didn't it ever get rough?" asked Chatty breathlessly. "Didn't you ever get sick? Didn't——"

"Oh, not ever; not even hardly ever. The water was like blue silk, wasn't it, Hanna? And the air smelled as fresh as Greenland's icy mountains and as sweet as India's coral strands. I couldn't bear it when we had to stop. When I'm on a boat, I feel as though I could sail forever—it's like being a fish and a bird and a breeze all at once; there's nothing so perfect in all the world!"

She leaned forward, catching and holding the red-headed young man's amused eyes with the shining challenge of her own.

"Almost thou persuadest me!" said that gentleman smoothly. "What an asset you'd make to the navy, Lindy! I'd no idea you were such a little sea-dog."

Lindy said softly, with the barest flicker of lashes, "Hadn't you? It's the way I intend to spend the rest of my life. The only thing I want in the world is a boat. . . . Hanna, did they ever find out what made you so dreadfully ill that night after we got to Port Limon?"

Hanna did not raise her eyes from her linked hands; she sat staring down at their long whiteness and the great square-cut diamond for almost a minute before she answered.

"No, not ever. . . . I'd been feeling badly all that day from the heat, and it may have been something that I ate, of course, or drank. It was a wretched way for me to wind up the trip."

"Hanna sick?" inquired Doug. "At Port Limon? How come no one told me?"

"Oh, Doug, we must have told you. It was the night after we transferred you to the Panama boat," said

Lindy. "We were absolutely terrified out of our wits, and there wasn't a doctor in the place, when we went ashore, because there was some kind of an epidemic in San José. It was nearly midnight before we got one off a cruiser. I'll never forget that nightmare of heat and noise as long as I live! They were loading a fruit boat by torchlight and all the darkies were groaning out some kind of dreadful chanteys, and Gavin and I were sitting in that little cabin with our hands over our ears, not even daring to look at each other——"

Hanna said, her eyes still on her hands, "Darling, you'd make measles sound dramatic. You weren't told, Doug, because—because there simply wasn't anything to tell." She pushed the plate before her aside, untasted, and rose to her feet. "D'you mind if I stand by the fire a minute and get warm?"

Chatty, stirring drowsily, protested: "Warm? Oh, Hanna, it's warmer than toast here now."

Hanna, spreading long fingers to the blaze, murmured, "I know, I know. It's absurd of me, but suddenly I felt cold."

Lindy, following her with eyes dark with concern, murmured under her breath, "Oh, Sherry, she's as white as a sheet. I'm an absolute idiot to have brought that up. She was desperately ill, and apparently it upsets her even to think about it." She rose swiftly, saying, "It's too cold for any of us in these absurd clothes—and besides, we'll simply ruin them bobbing for apples. Let's all run up and put on the old smocks; I found them in a drawer at home, and brought a whole suitcase full—they look better than ever! I brought sweaters for the men, too. Is everyone finished?"

Trudi was on her feet so quickly that she forgot to limp, pouncing energetically on the nearest tray.

"Chatty and I'll get after this while the rest of you prink," she announced with decision. "We're the girls that know how to dress on occasions of state. You can bring us down the smocks for dish-washing, and I'll be obliged if you'll remember that mine is the really good-looking one—spinach green trimmed with real mother-of-pearl buttons. If you try and work that nigger pink one off on me again, you'll do your own dishes. Yours is blue, isn't it, Chatty?"

Chatty, all dimples, called after the retreating figures, "The light blue, Lindy darling. The deep blue is Hanna's. Shall we fold up these tables, Trudi?"

"Dunno—let's just gather up the dishes first. This whole performance is simply a rich and sumptuous dodge on my part to pass a few words with you, my duck. Not having laid eyes on you for the last four years, I feel the need of catching up. I trust it's mutual?"

"Oh, Trudi darling, indeed it is. I've been simply longing to get at you ever since we arrived."

Trudi, gathering up the dishes with as much speed and precision as though she were the king of bus boys, paused to remark over her shoulder:

"That was the *doggonedest* performance of Kit's! I thought for about three delicious seconds that for once in my life I was going to see a perfectly good fight without paying fifty dollars for a ringside seat. Doug certainly had blood in his eye! And if you ask me, I don't think blood in the eye is particularly becoming to his particular type of beauty. It needs a brunette."

Chatty inquired in awe-stricken tones, "Trudi, you don't think they were really angry, do you? Why, Kit was laughing all the time; I could see him, and he was, honestly—and he never even lifted his voice."

"Laughing, was he?" inquired Trudi darkly. "Not—so—good. The only people that I know of that go in much for laughing are clowns with breaking hearts and villains with their hip pockets full of daggers and fell designs. Kit must have been a whole lot wilder than I thought—and I thought he was pretty good and wild. Help me to fold this thing."

"Well, I do think it was stupid of Doug to start that tune," said Chatty forlornly. "Of course I did the same thing, too, but I realized it almost the minute I'd done it, and Doug went straight ahead trampling over everyone to get at poor Lindy and snatching her off that way in spite of everything she said about being tired—and Jill looking as though she were going to die and Joel glaring like a wild cat. . . . I think it was simply awful! I don't blame Kit for stopping it. I'd have stopped it myself if I'd been near enough."

"Great grief, child, I'm not blaming him!"

"And I don't blame him for being a little angry with Doug, either, for not remembering," continued the gentle Chatty feverishly. "When you think how Sunny——"

"But, my good child, he did remember. Even the words—didn't you hear him?"

"No, I mean about how it was Sunny's own tune—how she——"

"Oh, Chatty, how does anyone as guileless as you survive in this world of sin? Doug remembered perfectly; he even remembered what happened the last time that he played it. He didn't turn the wretched thing on because he didn't remember. He turned it on because he didn't care."

Chatty set down her burdened tray with a small crash, her eyes round with horror.

"Oh, Trudi, how could he not care? He loved Sunny, too; why, he was crazy about her! Don't you remember what a tremendous rush he gave her that last fall? Don't you remember that paper chase when they both got lost for hours, and we were sure that it was on purpose? And that moonlight picnic that we went on to Great Falls, when we waited till nearly one o'clock for them, and Sunny had lost her hat when they came back? It was such a darling hat: a little scoopy green one with buttercups and white clover, and Sunny just laughed, and Doug said that he'd get her another if she'd promise to lose it again with him. I do think that he was crazy about her, Trudi."

"Well, who wasn't?" inquired Trudi, unimpressed. "You know as well as I do that Joel and Kit and Tom were all perfectly cuckoo about her. As for Neil Sheridan, he was simply demented on the subject; he told me before he asked me to marry him that he thought it was only fair to me to let me know that he couldn't ever care for me the way he had for Sunny; and he actually had the insolence to keep me up for three hours one night reading me about four cubic feet of letters that he'd written to her and never sent, because he felt that he wasn't good enough for her! He was keeping them for his grandchildren—or my grandchildren, if I decided that I wanted a burnt-out volcano as a consort. I hadn't been particularly interested in him till then, but about the second cubic foot I decided that any human being that could write that amount of unmitigated lunacy, and hang on to it, needed a keeper. Chatty, I give you my word that he had a thing in there that he solemnly assured me would have been a sonnet, if he hadn't had to make it eighteen lines long because he couldn't get all he had to say in fourteen! It was sweet, too—you'd

have married him yourself if you'd heard it. . . . Was Tom as bad as that?"

"I don't know," said Chatty humbly. "I never thought. I just knew he was the most wonderful person that ever lived or breathed; of course I never realized until after we'd been married how—how absolutely perfect he was, but ever since the first time my brother brought him home from Harvard for the Easter holidays, I knew that every other man that I ever met would just seem like a poor copy of Tom. I was a fat little fourteen-year-old imbecile who never got over seventy at school and had light eyelashes and one tooth out and a dreadful stutter—and, Trudi, he was wonderful to me! He used to take me for long walks, and help me over all the logs, and read all the easiest things to me out of the Golden Treasury and help me with my algebra—and he had a Phi Beta Kappa key and was the star man on the debating team. Oh, Trudi, I'd have blacked his boots!"

"Tom—Tom always was rather a dear," said Trudi.

"Trudi, I'd black them now. You don't know—nobody in the world knows—how—how *beautiful* Tom is. He's so *kind*." The candid gray eyes flooded suddenly with tears, and Chatty added with an apologetic smile, "It's silly of me, but I can't learn to be sensible about him. You know what a goose I am, Trudi darling, and how frightfully hard it must be for an intelligent person to have to put up with me for every single day of his life. Trudi, do you know that never once since we've been married has Tom said one unkind word to me? No, nor even an impolite one. I don't believe that very many married people could say that, do you?"

"Just offhand, I should say nary one, Chatty."

"I'm not even touching these dishes," murmured

Chatty, with a conscience-stricken glance at the still laden tables. "They've left glasses simply everywhere." She picked one up gingerly from the stand by the phonograph, eying the black disk with an expression of sick distaste. "I simply *hate* that tune—d'you know, Trudi, each time that it's played I've had the strangest, most frightening feeling, as though we'd called her back and she were somewhere in the room, watching us—watching us and wondering how we could bear to be so happy, when she can't play with us any more. That's nonsense, isn't it, Trudi? People can't come back when they're dead, can they? No matter how much they want to, they can't come back ever, can they?"

Trudi said in a strange, quiet voice, "I wonder. It must be lonely—being dead." She pushed the hair back from her forehead, and remarked with a grim smile to the pallid Chatty, "Cheer up, darling. If Sunny is anywhere around, she may not be envying us this party. In my far from humble opinion, Mrs. Ross, there's something just the least bit rum about this party."

"Oh, Trudi, it's wonderful! All of us together again after all these years. I can't believe it—it's too beautiful to be true! I've missed you all so—you most, Trudi, because we used to have such simply splendid times together. D'you remember how I used to beg Mummy to let me go home with you after parties, and we'd lie awake talking under our breaths till we were so excited that we'd forget, and your father would bang on the wall for us to stop?"

"I remember," said Trudi. "I remember that we never stopped—not till dawn came, and then we'd turn over and bury our noses under the pink comforters, and sleep, and sleep, till they came knocking on our doors to tell us that lunch had been ready for half an

hour. . . . I've never slept as sound since. What did we talk about all those hours and nights, Chatty?"

"We talked about us," said Chatty. "About what we'd do when we were married, and what flowers our bridesmaids should carry, and whether we'd go to Europe or Canada for our honeymoons, and how much money you had to have before you could afford a maid, and what we'd call our children. . . . We weren't even engaged—no one in the world had ever asked me to marry them! It's funny how sure I was . . . as sure as I was that I'd go to Europe. D'you know that I've never in my life been to Europe, Trudi?"

"I go twice a year," Trudi told her, the gay mouth suddenly bitter. "Except when I go three times. You can't get those transparent silk stockings here, no matter what they tell you, and then there's Château Margaux and the book stalls. . . . I was sure, too. . . . I was going to call mine Margot, after my great-aunt. And the little boy was going to be Peter. . . . Why does everyone always call little boys Peter? It's an obsession."

"You needn't look at me so accusingly," laughed Chatty, once more joyous. "I haven't a single child called Peter. One of the boys is called Tom, and the other one's Dick, after Dad—and the next one is going to be Harry. Did you ever hear anything so dreadful? The girls are more exciting. I love Nancy for a name, and the baby's Hope. Don't you like Hope? You don't think they'll tease her about it the way they did me about Charity?"

"Did we tease you, Chatty?" asked Trudi, the brusque voice oddly gentle. "I wish we hadn't teased you. . . . And I wish that I knew Tom and Dick and Hope and Nancy. They must be rather nice, if they take after their parents."

"Oh, Trudi, I do wish you did! You seem so awfully far away—farther away in New York than in all those other places. Sometimes I feel as though Hartsdale were twenty thousand miles from Park Avenue instead of twenty."

"Chatty—Chatty, is it I who have made you feel that?"

"You, darling?" Her eyes widened in candid surprise. "Oh, never. How in the world could you? It's just that you are so frightfully busy and important in your part of it, and I'm so busy and unimportant in mine, that we never have seemed to find a bridge to run across. I've wanted so awfully to have you see the house—and every time I get everything all fixed up so that it's simply ravishing, with flowers in the window boxes and new green paint on the shutters and I'm absolutely exploding with pride and anxiety to have you and Sherry out for the week end, Dick comes down with German measles, or Nancy has whooping cough, or Bohemia gets temperamental and wants to get married again, or Tom has to stay in to work over Sunday. You know, once I honestly was trying to get you on the telephone when little Tom fell over the banisters right spang under my nose and broke his collar bone. As soon as I got my breath and the doctor, I was perfectly wild—I'd just put up the new glazed chintz curtains and painted the porch furniture jade green, and I wanted you so awfully." She halted, her eyes round with distressed consternation. "Trudi—Trudi darling, what is it?" She pushed the dishes recklessly aside, catching at Trudi's arm. "Trudi, did I say something dreadful? I never saw you cry; darling, are you crying?"

"Chatty, I never saw myself. Let's investigate; perhaps we're both mistaken." She produced two inches of

cobweb and lace, applied it experimentally to either eye, and inspected it critically. "No—we were entirely correct. I haven't cried since a black kitten called Bony died when I was nine and three quarters. It had three white whiskers and one white paw, so you can hardly blame me——"

"No, no, you needn't laugh, Trudi—it was something I said——"

"Something you said, my innocent? It was every last mortal word you said, though I rather think it was the bit about the jade-green furniture that completely demoralized me. Did you paint it yourself?"

"Tom and I did. Over Decoration Day, you know; we always have perfectly divine times on holidays, getting everything cleared up that we've been talking about for weeks. Last election day——"

"You and your measles and your chintzes and your perfectly divine times!" said Trudi thickly. "Chatty, come here. I've never told you—I've never told you how sorry I was when Tom and Sherry broke up. I was horribly sorry, Chatty."

"I know." The clear eyes met Trudi's troubled ones bravely. "I was sorry, too, darling."

"I started three letters to you—and I tore them all up. It simply came as a thunderbolt to me; I thought they were getting on beautifully. I didn't know what to say, or how to say it. You see, Sherry never told me what happened."

"Didn't he, Trudi?"

"Not a word, except that there had been a misunderstanding about policy that made it advisable for them to separate. Did Tom tell you?"

"No." The small, sober voice hesitated for a moment, and then said quickly, "Not even that there was a

misunderstanding. Not anything. Just that he was going to try to get another job."

"I wouldn't have minded so much," said Trudi, staring down at their clasped hands, "if we hadn't run into such infernally good luck after that, and you into such infernally bad. I was in Cairo when Tom had pneumonia——"

"It wasn't luck that made him have a hard time," said Chatty. Her eyes never wavered, but her lips trembled suddenly, and she caught her teeth in them. "It was me—and the children. It was just when the second baby was coming, you see, and we didn't have much saved up, and I was sick all the time and an awful drag, with doctors and extra help and everything—and it was summer and all the offices were cutting down—and then he got pneumonia. And so we had rather a dreadful time for a while, and instead of being able to help, I was just a burden. Oh, Trudi, I'd meant to help him so!"

"I don't believe that any woman in this world ever helped a man more."

"No, no, I've ruined him. Everyone knows what his mind is; he had the best mind in law school—Sherry said so himself. But, Trudi, he doesn't dare strike out for himself because of us—he doesn't even dare ask for raises or promotions, because he can't forget those three months when he hadn't any job, and those old ghouls down there know it." She cried suddenly in a voice shaken and transformed by passion: "I'd like to kill them! Giving him more work and more work—and he's not even a junior partner—after eight years." And more passionately still, "He ought to be president of the Bar Association! He ought to be President of the United States!"

Trudi suddenly yielded to helpless mirth at the outraged pride of the small flaming face.

"Oh, Chatty, he's luckier than presidents; he has you."

"Oh, me, I'm no good at all—I'm worse than no good. And he can't bear not having us have everything; why, last winter I just said casually that I thought that new tea-wagon that the Elstons' had was awfully tricky and convenient for wheeling things in and out from the kitchen, and he went without a winter overcoat to give me one for Christmas, because he'd already bought me a fox neckpiece and a bicycle for Tommy, and when I——" She cast a horrified eye over her shoulder in the direction of the voices in the hall, and made a frantic pounce for her tray. "Oh, Trudi, good heavens, they're back and we haven't half finished!"

Trudi, tucking the cobweb away thoughtfully in her cuff, gave her one of her rare and radiant smiles as she picked up her tray. "I love you, Chatty; you're the most absurd creature that ever lived. That's the reason that I've always loved you better than anyone else, I suppose. And if you keep up any more of that ineffable nonsense about what a drag you are on Tom, I shall howl again in front of everyone, and tell them exactly what I think of you. . . . Lindy, where do we put this stuff—in the butler's pantry?"

"Yes, right through the far door. It won't take us a minute to wash them up; we'll all help. Trudi, here's your smock—yours, too, darling."

Ray said, "I never saw so many doors in my born days. Where do they all go?"

"These two on either side of the fireplace are just closets; the one next to the wood closet goes to the service quarters; the one next to the closet with all the old things in it goes to the chapel. That's all there are

except these huge things into the front hall—we never keep them closed."

"I suppose it's that long row of French windows opening out on the terrace," murmured Ray vaguely. "And I forgot that those other two were closets." She circled the great couch warily, and tucked her slim ankles under her in the corner of the love-seat closest to the fire.

"Still seeing Sidney in the offing, you little nit-wit?" inquired the observant Joel. "What happened to the desk, Lindy?"

"I don't know, truly. I suppose that even Sidney's most adoring descendants decided that that was a little sinister as a souvenir. Did you leave the things, Trudi?"

Trudi emerged from the dark doorway, with Chatty beaming at her heels, and ensconced herself virtuously in the other love-seat.

"Are you sluggards doing that murder all over again?" she demanded severely. "Don't you ever get tired of it? I'll bet Gavin started it. I'm certainly thankful to God that people don't go around sticking knives into anyone that they're annoyed with nowadays! It would take just about three or four fine, self-indulgent mornings up and down Park Avenue to make the New York death rate catch up with India's famine district in two leaps and a bound. What I'd do to that Lawrence woman who's forever cribbing my best hors d'œuvres! And that dumb parlour maid of mine, and that drunk little Olney boy, and——"

"Do you really believe that murder went out with periwigs?" asked Dart, his amused gray eyes fixed on her appraisingly. "Or is it your contention that they are invented by the press to supply headlines?"

"Oh, gunmen." Trudi dismissed them airily. "And

nice, warm-blooded Latins, and psychopathic dope-fiends, and the more excitable high-jackers—no, what I meant was that you could count on being reasonably safe with your friends and relations these days. So unlike the home life of the dear Borgias."

"My dear girl, I'd be willing to wager that no matter how exclusive you may be, you number at least three murderers in your circle of acquaintances."

"Gavin, you really are the most priceless flatterer. I swear to Heaven that I've never met one single murderer in my whole wasted life. Is it like that in Pittsburg? Sherry, let's live in Pittsburg."

"I don't mean avowed or even accused murderers," said Dart amiably. "I mean the undiscovered ones. The devoted daughter-in-law who has left two windows skilfully open on the old lady who is just recovering nicely from double pneumonia, and is leaving them two million in her will; the wife who goads her husband into the one honourable way out, the river; the husband who detests the notoriety of divorce, and solicitously administers that third headache tablet——"

"Gavin, I think that's dreadful." Hanna, her low voice shaken, her colour fled, leaned forward, gravely imperious. "I don't think that it's amusing at all—it's frightful to talk that way. And you're frightening poor Ray, too. When we get back, I'm going to turn your whole criminal library into a funeral pyre; you're getting absolutely morbid about it."

Trudi stared at her with incredulous delight.

"Hanna, I never in my whole mortal life heard you lay down the law to anyone until this minute. It's no end becoming, too—I'd take it up as a career, if I were you. Mrs. Gavin Dart, the well-known young society matron, in her inimitable transformation scene as The

Virago, nightly at 10.30 sharp, and twice on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The line forms to the right—women and children first——"

"No, no, I'm not trying to be funny. I think it's ghastly."

"Let's ignore her, Dart." The recalcitrant Joel pressed forward undaunted. "Look here, there's one thing about that tall tale of Lindy's that rather defeats me. There's not even a hint about that well-known essential, the weapon. Shouldn't you say that it would take something rather special in the line of knives to go through a collar and stock and sever the chord all at one fell swoop?"

"Well, you'd need a good sharp knife, and it would certainly require an extremely steady hand; there's precious little margin for error in that operation! It would be infinitely simpler and surer to strike from the side and get the jugular—granted that you had no objection to blood."

"But could you do that without being seen?"

"Oh, surely—simply come up behind the person like this——"

"Gavin! Gavin, if you don't drop this hideous nonsense this minute I'm going to leave the room. You're making me ill, and Ray and Lindy, too. I mean it. I am simply not going to stand——"

"Sorry, my dear. Evidently we're the lowest of ruffians, Hardy—we'll continue our entirely scientific research work with a more sympathetic audience. Hanna, if you'll stop looking at me like that, I'll atone by preparing this apple tub with my own unregenerate hands, and you shall have the very first bob. Just how does one go about filling a tub of these Gargantuan proportions?"

"Everyone gets a bucket—that's the fairest way, isn't it? If there aren't enough buckets in the kitchen there ought to be some at the far end of the service quarters, near the cold room."

Trudi said sternly from the door by the fireplace, "I don't want to throw a jarring note into this snug and merry gathering, but just as a matter of cold fact there are three or four hundred dishes out there waiting to get their faces washed before we pass lightly on to the pastimes of the evening, such as bucket filling, high jumping, and the like. I'll thank you all to pass slowly but snappily through this door, single file, so that I can count your noses and make sure there aren't any low slackers around here. You first, Mr. Hardy. Right after him, Mrs. Hardy; don't let go his coat-tails or the goblins 'll get you. Next, Sheridan——"

"Ah, Trudi, have a heart. Doggone it, those plates won't walk off in the night."

"Not another word out of you, my good man. Rules of the 'ouse, and well you knows it. March Hares never, never gambol till the harvest is in. I'm surprised at you, I am. Step lively, Larry. To the sink for you, Doug! Next, Kit. Lindy, you're the last; don't hostesses wash dishes?"

Lindy met the friendly, mocking eyes fixed on hers unwaveringly.

"I'm going to fix up the prizes while they're out, Trudi dear. I'll never get another chance before we start the games. It won't take more than a minute; I just have to label them and tie them up."

"Is—that—so?" drawled Trudi softly. "I'll say one thing for you; you're as resourceful a minx as ever I came across, and I've come across some. Tying up prizes, is it? Well, you don't want to catch cold doing it,

and this fire's nearly out. I'll let someone off long enough to bring back an armful of wood. Who is the fireman 'round here anyway—Kit Baird?"

Lindy, never moving from the deep chair, bestowed on her the most circumspect and fleeting of smiles.

"Yes, it's Kit. . . . Thanks a lot, Trudi darling; you think of everything."

Trudi said darkly, "I think a whole lot more than you'd believe, you unholy little fraud. You'd better get at those packages of yours before I expose you."

She vanished abruptly into the darkness of the passage, and Lindy sat staring at the empty doorway thoughtfully. After a long moment she stirred, stretched with all the luxurious grace of a Persian kitten, and rose lightly to her feet. There was a large green box in the corner of the room; she broke the cord about it, the smile hovering again at sight of the exquisite array of packages that it contained, trim and fragile as butterflies, with their great bows and tiny labels. She lifted them out carefully and stood on tiptoe to place them in a row along the mantel shelf—the dull silver one with the huge gold bow, the bright silver one with coral, the sapphire blue one banded with jade green, and the powder-blue one strewn with little stars; the flaming one with silver tassels and the frosty one knotted with flame. She hovered a moment touching their bows to even airier perfection, and still on tiptoe, turned to the dim mirror, moving a candle to get a better view, one finger on her lip, as though she were adjuring even the shadows to silence. After a critical moment, with tilted head, she frowned slightly and loosened the violet smock at wrist and throat. Still frowning, she slipped it from her with an impatient shrug of her shoulders, tossing it onto the chair behind her without a backward

glance, her eyes still on the mirror. The girl in it smiled dimly back at her, the long pearls gleaming at her ears, the tulle scarf falling lightly away from slim arms and white throat—a face all witchery and grace, with a beggar's eyes and a fairy's mouth.

A voice suggested amiably from the shadows beyond her shoulder: 'The next line is, 'Oh, how you startled me,' isn't it?"

She shook her head, not turning. "No. The next line is, 'I thought you were never coming.'"

Kit, with that Indian tread of his, passed her silently, depositing his load of wood on the hearth and kneeling beside it.

"I thought I made fairly good time, but obviously I'm a laggard. Trudi had some tale of how you were alternately tying bundles and freezing to death. Her diagnosis seems incorrect in every detail; obviously even a smock is too heavy!"

The fire flamed suddenly under his hands and on his hair. Lindy turned from the mirror, still smiling at what she saw.

"Not too heavy; too ugly! And I'm not cold at all without it—see!" She laid two hands, feather light, on his, and he swung to his feet as though they had touched some hidden spring.

"I'll be off then; shall I tell Trudi you're coming?"

She stood quiet as some small, lost animal, scenting danger on a distant wind.

"Trudi? No. What is it, Kit? I wanted to talk to you. Don't—don't you want to talk to me?"

He said, staring down at her with something alien and dangerous in his eyes, "No. I'm not feeling particularly—conversational. Nor, on a wager, are you! And I'm not precisely hell-bent on permitting myself to be

made a fool of so soon again either. Still, chivalry is not entirely dead." He put a casual finger under her chin, tilted the small face to his, and bent his head. "That what you want, little Lindy?"

She said, unmoving, in a voice so low that he could hardly hear, "No. Don't touch me, please. I'll not permit you to cheapen yourself by cheapening me."

He dropped his hand with a careless shrug.

"Sorry—I'm apparently unusually dense to-night."

Lindy whispered, "What is it? Why do you want to hurt me? You shouldn't want to hurt me; it's too easy."

Kit, flicking a glance at her more casual than his finger, disclaimed lightly, "My dear child, I wouldn't hurt you for the world. Am I dismissed? I'll send King back to console you for my obvious deficiencies."

"Doug?" The lashes lifted over blankly incredulous eyes. "Why should you send Doug?"

"Ah, my dear, I'm walking delicately before the Lord to-night, let me tell you. If I irritate Doug again by trespassing on his own private property he may do something to spoil this delightful party, as you suggest."

She said, "I am your property. Not Douglas nor any other man that breathes means as much to me as your shadow on the wall. . . ." She laid her hand against it, and asked in a still voice of wonder, "Are you jealous of Doug, Kit?"

There was a swift gleam of teeth, but his eyes, fast on the shadow, did not soften.

"Lord, I don't know!" He lit a cigarette with one dextrous move, drew a deep breath, and smiled at her again through the blue haze. "I'm not a connoisseur on jealousy. How does it strike you?"

She answered in that same still voice, "It strikes me

as—rather wonderful. Let's—let's pretend that you're jealous of Doug, Kit."

He said through the smoke in that careless drawl that missed insolence only because of its complete indifference, "I can think of better ways of spending a week-end."

Lindy, stretching up to rest an ineffably gentle finger against the cheek of the haughty shadow, murmured with a sidelong sweep of lashes, "Oh, and so can I!"

And suddenly the man and the shadow relaxed, and his careless laughter filled the room.

"God help us, you're beyond redemption! D'you know that you fooled me completely this evening, you small minx? And I'd have sworn that Eve herself couldn't do it, let alone her youngest daughter."

"Fooled you? You mean you thought that I was flirting with Doug? Oh, Kit, I really was frightfully worried that you might do something idiotic, and he's been drinking far too much all evening."

"Doug, Sapphira mia? It wasn't your rather tame performance with Doug that got the wind up—though since we're going to put all our hands on the table from now on, I'll own that the fine proprietary way that he's been swashbuckling around you all evening and your meek acquiescence have come closer to making me lose my temper than anything that's happened to me in the last twenty-four years, when I took a licking that I didn't deserve. Just between the two of us, if you won't tell a soul, I did lose my temper. But that was only because I was still suffering from delusions of grandeur. My apologies—and congratulations."

"Kit, if you're trying to be hateful, you'll have to be just a little clearer. What is it that you're congratulating me on?"

"Let's call it your—conquest of King. Are your intentions honourable, Lindy?"

She said nothing, leaning against the shadow, her eyes fixed on his in a strange look of wonder and despair.

Kit inquired with dangerous smoothness, "I'm asking if you intend to marry Doug King?"

She shook her head, voiceless.

"Surely, even he would hardly assume such authority without reasonable encouragement! Are you assuring me that he has lacked even that?"

She said, "Kit, I've known Doug for years. He is one of my oldest friends, as he is one of yours."

Kit, lighting another cigarette, remarked evenly, "You flatter me. Douglas is no old friend of mine."

"Since when? Since to-night? Oh, Kit, you can see that he hardly knows what he's doing."

"And even that fails to endear him to me, callous dolt that I am. No, that old friendship of ours flickered and waned a good two minutes after we met. How long has this little romance of yours been going on, by the way? Is it pre-war, or do we date it from that enchanted four weeks on the *Starling?*"

Lindy took her hand from the shadow, and came slowly toward him. When she was a handbreadth off she halted, and said in a small, sickened voice, "There has been no romance between us. Doug hardly looked at me on the *Starling*—why should he, when he had Hanna to look at? He was mad about her . . . Doug has flirted with me, as he has with every fairly pretty woman that he meets. It has never occurred to me to take him seriously for one moment. He knows every rule of the game perfectly, and if I took any of his declarations seriously, he would consider that it was I who had broken them."

"I wonder now! So he makes declarations, does he? You never flirt with Douglas, naturally?"

She cried, "Oh, of course, of course I have flirted with Douglas. I have flirted with half a hundred men. I have told you so—I tell you so again. What have you and I to do with flirting?"

"Ah, what, indeed? That's precisely what I was about to ask you on my way out. Why not save these uncontested beguilements for some worthier lad?"

"You thought that I was flirting with you, Kit?"

"My dear, you know as well as I that one of the cardinal rules of that pretty game at which you're so adept is that one never, never for one moment admits that it's flirting till it's all over. Like Doug, I'm counting on you not to break the rules! If my memory went back on me for a minute this afternoon, you'll be generous, I'm sure. I'll own I'm rusty at it. I haven't indulged in the drawing-room version for lo, these many moons, and candidly, I'm not going to now. So with your permission, I'll just drift out of the picture. I'm afraid that our playmates are being determinedly discreet, so perhaps I'd better give them the signal of release."

She said, "Oh, God!" in a small, quiet voice of despair that was more a rebuke to that distant deity than a prayer, and locked her hands behind her, lest they betray her.

After a moment she whispered desolately, finding no longer even a voice with which to hold him, "You don't believe that—not for one moment, not for one second. You're saying it because you don't want me, and you think that the easiest way to get rid of me is to make me hate you . . . You can't make me hate you; you can only make me despise myself. I do—I do despise myself."

He asked, suddenly paler than the little ghost before him, "Lindy, haven't you any pride at all?"

The little ghost said, "No, no, I haven't time—I haven't time for pride. Even if you stay they'll be back any minute—and in two days you'll be gone—out of my life again, out of my life forever. You shan't take all my dreams and warp and twist them into cheapness and coarseness—if you don't want them, you must give them back to me. I won't let you leave me nothing but ugliness for a memory."

He asked, the hard, the bitter, the insolent blue eyes suddenly and amazingly dark with tears, "What is it that you want me to leave you, little Lindy?"

"Don't leave me; don't, don't leave me."

She was weeping suddenly, desperately, the small face still turned to his flooded with the unheeded tears, the treacherous hands still locked fast behind her.

"Lindy, how can I not leave you? I've nothing in God's world to give you, not even love—only its ugly bastard, jealousy. Let me go, darling."

"Kit, I can't make you love me, but you mustn't say that I don't love you—you mustn't. Kit, you do believe that I love you?"

"Lindy, don't let me believe it."

"You must, you must. I'll make you. I won't have you say again that—that . . . was flirting. I won't have you leave me without knowing what you're leaving! Kit, listen; I have every scrap of paper that you ever wrote to me, every flower that you ever sent to me, every glove that you ever touched. Are you listening?"

He said, "Oh, Lindy, when did I write to you? I never wrote to you."

"You did, you did. The first week after I met you—at that garden party at the Von Thals', don't you re-

member? No, no, don't say you don't remember. There were little pear trees in flower all around the garden walls, and lanterns like gold bubbles in the trees, and some gypsies playing a Viennese waltz. . . . My fan had silver spangles on it, and you broke it, and took it away with you to mend—you said that you'd keep it as a hostage, and bring it back that Sunday in exchange for a cup of tea. . . . And on Saturday you met Sunny, and the fan came back all beautifully mended with three lines saying that you were so sorry that you couldn't come with it. . . . I have the fan, too. How can you say you never wrote me?"

"Even the fan I broke, my little Lindy?"

"Even the fan you mended. And that wasn't all—oh, you wrote me quite often; the time that Sunny couldn't go to the party the Argentines gave, don't you remember? You wrote to ask if I wouldn't go instead, and you sent me some pansies that looked like white velvet, and I wore them on my shoulder—they were the loveliest flowers I ever had. And we had supper in the patio, at little tables in green alcoves, with parrots swinging high up in the leaves, and lights like fireflies going and coming and voices singing to guitars somewhere far away. You wrote to me again. There were menu cards with wreaths of little monkeys and macaws and orchids, and you wrote our names on the back of one, and we cancelled them, just as though we were nine years old. Don't you remember? Christopher Baird and Linda Pallisser—friendship, love, indifference, hate—kiss, court, marry. It came out 'court' for me and 'friendship' for you, and I was frightfully proud, because yours came out friendship instead of indifference or hate. I'm frightfully proud still, Kit. Don't make it indifference or hate."

And at sight of the poor little smile beyond the flooding tears, he turned away his eyes.

"And once at old Mrs. Tenner's, you stole two yellow rosebuds off the table, and fastened them into the bows of my slippers—I have the slippers—and the bows—and the roses, Kit, all in a silver box. And once——"

He cried, "Lindy, don't! Darling, don't!" and caught her in his arms. "You're so small—you're such a little, little thing . . . Lindy, teach me how to be gentle to you—I've forgotten what gentleness is." He could feel her trembling as though she would never stop, but her voice did not tremble.

"Kit, are you going to take me to Poland?"

"Lindy, I can't swing Poland. I'm an outlaw—no more, no less. I can't run the risk of getting Larry into trouble; if anything slipped up, I'd blow my brains out. He and Joel trust me; I can't fail them by letting them find out what a rotter I am. I'll simply clear out again. I was off my head to even think of anything else."

"Then take me to Las Cayas." She let Poland go without a sigh.

"Las Cayas? You?" His arms tightened about her, and she smiled, heedless of the bitterness of his voice. "There's not a white man, unless you count old Tom, and he's streaked with the tar brush from his head to his heels. We'll be shifting to another base in a month or so, anyway; it's hardly more than a port of call. You in Las Cayas!" His eyes swept that fragile grace, all tulle and pearls and fragrance, with eyes both despairing and tender.

"I'll stay on the boat; I'd love to stay on the boat——

"Oh, darling, before I leave you I've thought of a present for you. A little strait-jacket—a nice one for your very own, all trimmed with lace and frills, with

pretty blue ribbons to tie under your chin. You're mad enough to make any March Hare I ever heard of frantic with envy... On the boat, no less! I'm to be Robin Hood, I suppose, with a dozen merry men, tried and true, at my shoulder, and you pacing the decks in fine brown boots and a little green jerkin and a scarlet feather in your cap? A cross between Maid Marian and the pirate's pet?" He held her as lightly as though he were rocking a tired child to sleep, murmuring to the small, enchanted face, still wet with tears, "What would you do without your doll, Lindy? Whom would you find to tell you fairy tales, and make you daisy chains, and sing you lullabies? Pirates lead such busy lives they haven't any time for little girls. When they aren't at plank-walking, they're playing with black flags, and dividing doubloons, and shaking dice for the Circassian slaves. They haven't time for a good game of tag from one year's end to another."

She whispered, "You're laughing at me—you think I'm just a scatterbrained little fool? Wait, wait and see. I love it when you laugh at me."

"Laughing, my Lindy? Look again."

She breathed, "Hush!" and slipped from his arms as lightly and easily as a shadow, only her eyes, enchanted and caressing, lingering to betray her. Doug King's voice called gayly from the shadows beyond the door:

"Honey lamb, where you hiding? Need some help in here?" The voice checked abruptly. After a moment it continued smoothly enough, but with something altered and menacing under its surface suavity, "Oh, sorry! I'd no idea that I was offering such a poor substitute in the line of entertainment. I gathered you were busy with packages, Lindy, and thought I'd offer a hand. I seem to be as superfluous as usual."

"Oh, Doug, don't be so absurd. The prizes are all done—look! Kit was just fixing up the fire, and we were wondering what in the world had happened to all of you. Aren't the others coming?"

"So that's what you were wondering?" The bold, insistent glance swept the softly ruffled tulle, the clear pallor of the small face, fresh as though Lindy had knelt to bathe it in dew, the dark eyes, questing and bewitched. "The fireman has a desirable job around here apparently. Since when has it counted a charming companion as one of its assets?"

Kit, his red head bent to catch a light, said amiably over his shoulder, "Since I took it."

"Exactly. Modesty's one of your strong points, isn't it, Baird? Well, the lucky have the luck! Is it luck or good management, Lindy?"

"Why not ask me?" inquired Kit gently. "I doubt very much whether Lindy feels the necessity of offering you any explanations whatever, while I should regard it as both a pleasure and a privilege to retire to some secluded spot and draw you up a chart, diagram, and blueprint as to the shortest way out of your obvious difficulties—such as how to withdraw gracefully and inconspicuously when you find that you've unconsciously intruded, for instance."

"I'll settle with you in some secluded spot all right," said Doug in a voice oddly thick, "and in the meantime I'll thank you to keep your hands off of——"

"Hey, you in there!" Trudi's gay call lifted its challenge from the other side of the closed door. "Open up, will you? We're loaded to the gunwales with water, while you blasted Sybarites while away the hours. Open up, for the love of Pete!"

Kit, his eyes gleaming in the shadows, remarked over

his shoulder as he moved toward the door, "Don't lose heart, Doug—the night's still young. We'll have that chat yet. What ho, without!"

He flung the door open, and stood aside to let the burdened and indignant crew troop by toward the two immense tubs.

"Just what are you doing in here, Doug King?" inquired Trudi, with some asperity. "Did I tell you to report at the sink with a bucket after you finished chopping that ice, or did I not? Better men than you have missed out on apples for less than that, let me tell you, my lad. Ow—curses on you, Sherry, you're splashing us to the bone. Lend a hand here, Kit!"

Kit, still smiling reminiscently as he deftly shifted and emptied pails, inquired of the voiceless Lindy, "What's the order of events? Do we start with apples?"

"Oh, Kit, we never start with the apples!" cried Chatty, scandalized. "We start with the mirror and candle, and then the apples, and then flour and the ring and then—what comes next, Lindy?"

"I'm not sure." Lindy's voice and eyes were still far off. "The apple on the string? Or fortunes in the bowl? It's Hide in the Dark at midnight, anyway. We draw lots for the candle and mirror, don't we? Kit, get some straws from the hearth broom."

"What in the world's the mirror and the candle?" demanded Ray suspiciously.

"Well, we lock all the doors into this room," explained Chatty gleefully, "and put out all the lights except one candle, and then we all go out except the girl that gets the long straw. She stays behind in the dark, and she stands there holding the candle in one hand and the mirror in the other. Where in the world is that hand mirror? I put it on the table in the corner——"

"Here!" announced Doug triumphantly.

"Oh, good. Well, she stands there and says three times over quite loud, so that we can all hear in the hall:

"'Mirror, mirror, dark and bright,
Show me the man I'll wed to-night!'

And the third time she says it, she sees his face in the mirror."

"You mean to say she stays alone in the dark here with nothing but one candle?"

Joel grinned appreciatively at the horrified incredulity depicted on his wife's expressive countenance.

"Ah, well, you mustn't forget that all of us are right on the other side of the door. All the creature has to do if anything—er—agitates her is to let out one good long, ear-splitting yell and we'll all be at her side in the well-known trice. Even you could hardly take exception to that!"

Ray bestowed on him a shuddering glance of horror and indignation, and motioned the straw-filled hand away from her with as vehement a gesture as though it were a poisoned serpent.

"Joel Hardy, if you think I'd put one foot in this room by myself, even if every light in the place was blazing like fireworks, you're perfectly insane. Take those things away!"

Hanna said gently, "But there are only two of us who are eligible anyway, aren't there? All of us know our fates but Jill and Lindy. Let Lindy pull, Joel!"

Lindy pulled, and stood poised to check the golden straw between her fingers with the one that Jill held out.

"Mine, isn't it? Oh, Jill, that's too bad! Doug, will you light the candle? Larry, make sure that the doors

are locked, will you, and Tom can start putting the lights out."

"I've got the door to the service quarters locked, but there's no key to this one into the chapel," announced Larry over his shoulder.

"It isn't there? No, I remember, I dropped it down the grating in the sink, trying to poke out some soap that got wedged in it. Now what?"

"Well, the only way through the chapel is that door from the service quarters that Doug fell through," said Tom reasonably. "If you lock that it cuts this room off just as well as though you locked this one. Here, Larry, you take the candle, and fix the one out there. You go with him, Joel, to see that he plays fair."

"Mirror, mirror, dark and bright," hummed Lindy, pirouetting experimentally. "Children, there's too much light from the fire; can't you break it up, Kit, and put the screen in front of it?"

"All snug and fast out there," proclaimed Larry, handing back the candle. "Now, girls and boys, out into the night. All right, Lindy?"

"Oh, better than all right."

"On our way, then. We lock these hall doors from the outside, don't we? Sing out if your ghostly cavalier makes a snatch at you, my child."

"I'll sing. . . ."

The bright square that was the door receded slowly into the dark square that was the hall, and the great room was abruptly a cave of darkness filled with strangeness and silence save for the distant crying of the storm.

Lindy, the candle high, called clearly, "Can you hear?"

"Aye, aye!"

The gay assent pierced the walls, barely muffled.

"'Mirror, mirror, dark and bright,'" chanted Lindy, her eyes fast on the little shield, shining and mysterious as still water, "'Show me the man I'll wed to-night!'"

The untroubled pool mirrored back only the questing eyes, the smiling lips of the singer, and she held it farther off, so that it could hold nothing but darkness.

"'Mirror, mirror, dark and bright
Show me the man I——'"

There was a sound behind her, a stir so slight that it was hardly motion—the sound of a footfall on the bare floor. A voice that was scarcely a whisper said,

"For God's sake, don't stop! Don't let them know I'm here. Finish it out, then over again."

. . . "'I'll wed to-night!'" sang the clear voice. "Kit, but how did you find——"

"Never mind that—never mind anything but what I'm saying to you. Sing again. Don't move. Only listen."

"'Mirror, mirror, dark and bright!'" The clear, unwavering voice rose again obediently, "'Show me the man . . .'"

"Lindy, are you listening? Who told you that I was in Baltimore with Sunny Leighton?"

She answered, docile and unswerving, her whisper matching his, "It was Doug—Doug King. Kit, why——"

She moved her hand, and for a moment, blinding and illuminating as a searchlight, the candle caught the face behind her in the dark pool, and the mirror slipped through her fingers with a long, shivering crash, its disastrous chimes echoing delicately through a silence

more terrible than speech. Outside she could hear feet running, hands at the door, and the rising clamour of voices—but she stood motionless, voiceless, candle high, staring down at the glittering fragments that for one dreadful moment had caught and held his face.

IV

Over that outer tumult of voices and laughter she could hear Doug's lusty impatience, strong above them all.

"The damned thing's stuck. Pull the door toward you, and jerk it upward. Nothing wrong in there, Lindy?"

She lowered the candle, her eyes still on the shining heap, and forced through stiffened lips a voice so lightly amused that she raised a startled head to listen.

"Nothing—nothing at all. The wretched thing simply slipped out of my fingers."

"You broke the mirror? Oh, Lindy darling, how dreadful!" Chatty's wail of horrified amusement seemed to come from a great distance, but the girl who had broken the mirror shivered suddenly and strongly, as though she felt a cold wind at her back.

"Let me have a go at that lock, Larry. Put your knee against it there, and shove, All right—shove!"

The door creaked, yielded, and the bright square that was the hall swung slowly back into place. For a moment the crowding faces on the threshold caught a glimpse of the small wraith in her misty draperies, standing in a pool of flickering light with magic shattered at her feet; the candle held before her like a shield flickered, wavered, went out, surrendering the room to darkness as though it were its natural heritage: Lindy, safe in the darkness, covered her face with her hands, letting the candle slip unheeded.

"Lord, what went then? The lights are about a foot to the right of the door, aren't they? Oh, sorry; who did I get then?"

"You got me," commented Trudi bitterly. "And if it's of the slightest interest, you're the third guy that's got me in the last three seconds. Why don't you stop moving around like a mob scene, and try striking a match?"

"Joel—Joel Hardy, where are you?" Ray's voice reached out frantically toward his reassuring laughter.

"Right here, you little nut. I'll bet I left every blessed match upstairs in my coat, too. Hasn't anyone got even a cigarette lighter?"

Kit's voice inquired amiably from the hall, "Who's crying for light? And what's all the stampeding, anyway? Trying out a new game, Doug?"

Doug said, "No—an old one. Give us a light if you've got one."

"Oh, Kit, she broke the mirror, and then we couldn't unlock the door, and then Doug opened it, and her candle went out, and——" Chatty's jubilant recital broke off abruptly as a flame flared blue and gold against the blackness, and Kit's long fingers reached easily for the switch.

Lindy was on her knees gathering the shining fragments into the great square of chiffon that she called a handkerchief. Her voice rose cool and serene as a hidden spring.

"Could someone get a scrap-basket? No, no, under the table. . . . Kit, where in the world are you going with that raincoat?"

"I'm off on a rescue party. Lindy, can't we leave you alone for a minute without you getting into mischief? Seven years' bad luck for little girls that throw mirrors."

"But it was such a little mirror," explained Lindy

demurely, shaking the contents of the chiffon square into the proffered basket. "And I didn't especially throw it—it slipped. You aren't going out into that storm, are you, Kit? But you simply can't!"

"Can't I, though! I'll have you know that I've just discovered that dat ole debbil wind's gone and taken my favourite steed and thrown it clear across the road against the stone wall. I'm going to get it under cover if it's the last deed I do! Where's the best place to park it, Lindy?"

"There's a tool shed near the service quarters round on the other side. But, Kit, I do think you're mad! Did the storm really blow it over?"

"That and a few other things. This here's a storm that merits your respectful attention, my child. Cast an eye out yonder!"

"Oh, good heavens!" mourned Lindy, her eyes straining through the still tumultuous darkness. "It's one of the biggest cedars, isn't it? And the holly's down, too—oh, I ask you, just look at my favourite holly by the gate!"

"Where's all this fine frenzy of haste about your precious motorcycle disappeared to?" inquired Doug King, still lounging in the doorway.

"Still burning bright, Doug, thanks for reminding me. See you later, won't I?"

Doug said smoothly, "I hardly see how you can avoid it. But I certainly understood that you couldn't even wait to see Lindy through her trick before you dashed up to get your raincoat and hurled yourself into the night! It isn't an optical illusion that you're still here, is it?"

"No, no, old boy—it's a credit to your powers of observation. Tool shed's clear on the other side, Lindy?

Hold everything, everybody, when I open this window!"

He was gone, and the black wind tore by him through the great room like a wild thing, whipping the brocade curtains aside as though they were flimsy muslin, throwing the crystal chandeliers into frantic jangling, lashing flying hair and skirts and scarves into a pandemonium of despairing shrieks and scurryings. It took Larry and Tom and Joel to swing it to and make it fast, while Jill danced like an enchanted mænad, and Chatty, spinning like a top, shouted jubilance above the storm.

"Oh, Lindy, I do think it's too divine! Listen, couldn't we all get raincoats and dash out just for a minute? Lindy, do let's!"

"Chatty, I honestly think that everyone has gone perfectly mad! I wish that some of you would burn up a little of that superfluous energy by pushing all these things against the walls; we'll simply drench them when we start after the apples."

Doug, who had not lifted a hand from the doorway, lifted his voice.

"Who had the keys to the chapel and this room . . . you, Larry?"

Larry, rolling up his shirt sleeves, answered amiably, "Have 'em now, if it comes to that. Why? D'you want them?"

"There aren't any spare ones hanging around, are there?"

"There are not. I'm the locksmith and I'll take an oath that there's not an extra key in Lady Court."

"Any of the others work any of these doors."

"No, sir. Every lock its own key is our motto around here. Why these dark suspicions, Doug? Are you hinting at foul play amongst the merrymakers?"

"I'm hinting at nothing." He strode to the door leading to the service quarters, gave it a vicious and ineffectual rattle, crossed to the door, still slightly ajar, that led to the chapel, and stood peering into the gloom beyond it with a long scowl.

"Hand me a candle, someone. I'd like to have a look at that door to the service quarters."

"The chapel door at the back? Oh, Lindy, he doesn't believe it's locked!" Chatty's irrepressible voice soared gleefully. "He thinks Kit came through it, and made you drop the mirror! You do, Doug, don't you? Oh, Doug, do find out if it's locked—hurry, hurry!"

Doug's voice, from the darkness of the chapel, answered curtly, "It's locked." He came back slowly, the pin point of flame preceding him; it was not until he had come within a pace or so of Lindy that he halted, and flicked it out with a heavy finger.

Lindy, not raising her head from her struggle with a folding table that would neither fold nor stay open, lamented:

"I can't make it do anything, and it's pinched my fingers twice. There must be a catch somewhere——"

He asked heavily, "What's Kit Baird to you, Lindy?"

Lindy murmured with a panic-stricken glance over her shoulder, "Oh, Doug, you aren't going to start that again? Do be careful—someone will hear you, and I'm so mortally tired of scenes. Help me with this, won't you?"

He took it from her hands, repeating implacably, "I asked you what Kit Baird was to you?"

She replied, in the silveriest of voices, but with some bright dark fire leaping behind her eyes, "Doug, that's

sheer impertinence. I've asked you to be careful for my sake; I ask you now to be careful for your own. If Kit comes back and finds that you are annoying me, I don't think that you'll find it particularly amusing."

"So I'm annoying you, am I?" He balanced a little unsteadily on his heels, his face so deeply flushed that it looked swollen. "It wasn't so long ago that you didn't look on a little talk with me as annoying, my dear."

Lindy, pale as moonlight, her eyes on the ugly flush, whispered despairingly, "Doug, please—please! I'll talk to you later—not now. Later, I promise——"

"You've been promising things for quite a while, Lindy. I'm just a dash fed up on promises . . . jam yesterday and jam to-morrow, but never jam to-day, what? And now that the prodigal son's returned, you're off even jam to-morrow, it seems! But something tells me, Lindy, that I'm going to get that jam."

"Doug, I've never promised you anything at all, except to think over all that pretty nonsense. I never dreamed that it was more than nonsense. I was so sure that you——"

He said in that thickened voice, "You were wrong; when I ask a woman to marry me, I'm not trying to divert her. And I count myself in great luck to be on hand this time to prevent a second Baltimore rendezvous in your family——"

She cried frantically, her hand over her mouth to smother the words, "Oh, how dare you! How dare you say that to me!"

"I dare say a good deal more than that to you, my girl. I dare say——"

Chatty's voice cried from the window, "Here he comes! Tom, you open this window—you catch hold of

it, too, Joel. Oh, Kit, are you drowned? O-o-oh, look out for those flowers on the spinet—catch them, somebody!"

Gavin Dart caught them, and Trudi caught a whirling sofa pillow, and Sherry caught someone's silver scarf, blown like a leaf the full length of the room. Kit, shaking the rain from him in a glittering shower, his red hair turned sleek and bronze as a seal's coat, lifted a commanding hand for silence.

"Hey, pipe down—pipe down there! I've got some news for you, my fine buckaroos, that'll give you something to sing about from now to Christmas. Take a deep breath and drive your heels into the ground. . . . Boys and girls, the bridge is down."

They stood staring at the bearer of tidings in a mild stupor, groping to fit the amazing words into the neat pattern of the house party. It was Trudi who first found her voice, but even she sounded slightly incoherent.

"The bridge? The bridge to Washington? The bridge on the road?"

"The very bridge, Trudi. The bridge at the foot of the hill, on the road to Washington."

Lindy came forward swiftly.

"But, Kit, are you sure? How do you know? It's almost half a mile away—you can't know! You're joking, aren't you?"

"Joking when we may all be cannibals before we can fight our way out of this? No, no, my child, the bridge is down all right; I was trundling the old bus round to the end of the service quarters, and I turned the lights full on to get some idea of where I was headed; there's a clean sweep just beyond the big gate where you can see down the hill to the creek, and as a conservative

statement, I'd like to assure everyone here that the creek is at present about two and a half times the size of the Potomac at its widest point. It's torn one of the piers on the south side clear away from its moorings, and dipped the whole thing so deep in the water that the only thing that could get over it now would be an airplane."

Lindy asked, with a sudden desperate vibration in her voice, as though a harp string had been pulled too taut, "But, Kit—but, Kit, you aren't saying that we're really marooned, are you? Surely there must be some other way out?"

He chided, laughing, "Is this the far-famed Southern hospitality? What other way out do you suggest?"

She made a piteous clutch at lightness.

"Oh, you know how I'd adore having you for the next five years, but we only brought food for three days, and if supplies can't get in to us, and we can't get out to them . . . Couldn't we possibly manage the North Trail, and get the Jersey turnpike that way? Joel and Larry have cars."

"The North Trail? My good child, how long has it been since you were at Lady Court? It used to be fairly difficult for a good active pony to negotiate in fine weather, and what it must be after these rains! No, I imagine that we can count the North Trail well out of it."

"Well, then, isn't there any place that we could ford?"

Something in the small frozen smile that she turned to his mockery checked him abruptly; he gave her a long scrutiny that he transferred leisurely to Doug. And after a moment he remarked thoughtfully, "Well, if worst comes to worst, we can probably manage to get over that shallow bit to the west of the bridge in a day or so.

Though now that I've made my grand effect and put the fear of God into all you convivial souls, I don't mind telling you that a few stout lads from Washington with some planks and mortar can shore it up so that it'll be passable by the time we're ready to use it."

The frozen smile melted to tremulous and exquisite relief.

"Kit, you're outrageous! You mean that it will be passable before we even need it?"

"Well, passable but dangerous, let's say. But don't let's forget to turn in a hurry call in the morning, for the love of the Lord; the quicker those birds get at it the better. This meeting is now called to order. Who's fixing the apples for these tubs?"

"I was just going to. Look, here they are." Lindy swept the contents of the wicker hamper into her fragile skirts, reckless with relief. "Pull the tubs out further toward the middle, Kit. The first man and the first girl to get one get a prize, and the last one pays a forfeit. Fair warning—I'm going to drop them in!"

The clustering faces drew back as the apples fell, little crystal fountains jetting high around each rosy ball.

"There! Everyone on their knees . . . we'll take seven at this tub. Doug, you call the rules and start us off, will you?"

Doug bawled obligingly above the gathering tumult, "Now get this, and get it straight, you kids! Get to the side lines the minute you catch your apple, and stay there. Lock your two hands behind you and keep 'em locked; anyone using hands for any purpose whatever pays the worst forfeit we can think up. Now is that all straight as a string? I don't want any come-backs and alibis around here after we once get started."

"Hey, listen!" demanded Ray despairingly. "D'you

mean that we have to kneel right down on this floor and catch those apples with our faces?"

"In a nutshell, child—you've put it in a nutshell. Everyone down, now, and when I yell 'go,' we're off, without fear or favour. Now! On your mark." Doug's boom rose untroubled and elate. "One for the money, March Hares, two for the show! Three to make ready—and four for to GO! Watch yourself, there, Sheridan, watch yourself. Keep away from those swinging doors, Hanna! Gangway for the Black Douglas—Gangway!"

And suddenly the still beauty of the room, lonely and lovely and a little ominous in its remoteness, was shattered by pandemonium—the joyous and outrageous pandemonium of the last five minutes of recess echoing through the red schoolhouse; of the howls of Comanchee Indians piercing the Sabbath calm from the dusty barn loft; of the maniac shrieks of the pirate crew capturing the Spanish galleon in the darkest corner of the garret—and over that din of soul-satisfying shrieks no gentle voice protesting and imploring "Children! Children, for pity's sake!" For this once the children could shriek their untrammelled souls out, uncontrolled and unmolested, with only the room to protest with faint echoes of delicate outrage.

"Sherry, you pig, that's mine!" "Lay off me—lay off, will you?" "Ray—Ray, cut that out now!" "Quit shoving, will you?" "Ah, go chase yourself round the block!"

Over the shrieks and splutters and gurgles rose laughter, wild and unrestrained, and a mighty clamour of voices, indistinguishable in their hilarity, shrill and clear as youth itself.

"Ow, murder! He's d-drowning me!" "Look out for my hair, you great galoot! Look a-out!" "That for you, my fine ger-rill!" "Kit! Kit! H-help!"

In that riot of tossing heads and heels, Hanna's rippled gold and Lindy's bronze velvet, Sherry's sleek darkness and Jill's bright waves, shifted and changed and vanished in a gay kaleidoscope—and in their stead little pigtails sprouted, round curls danced, ribbon bows flashed, and soft bangs were pushed recklessly aside —for these flying minutes they felt descend on them once more the lost delight of pinafore and sock, of knickerbocker and overall.

"It's mine! It's mine!" "To the side lines, you!" "Paws down, Trudi, down, I say!" "Sherry, stop snapping! Make him stop, he's driving me mad!" "Side lines, Larry!" "Help, help—that's not fair! Help!"

On the side lines the victorious survivors brandished their apples, howling and dancing like so many Red Indians, lifting intolerable voices in intolerable taunts.

"Yah, yah, Gavin couldn't get an apple! Trudi couldn't get an apple! Jill couldn't get uh apple!" "Over here, ole sport! This way to the conquering heroes." "Look alive there, Jill. One of you girls is in for a forfeit." "Ye-ay, Trudi! Atta girl, easy does it! Ye-e-ay, Trudi!" "Jill's forfeit! Oh, poor Jill!" "Get a towel for Trudi someone; that girl dived three feet for it!" "Oh, Larry, I'm drenched to the bone. Do make it a nice, quiet little forfeit; look, I'm absolutely drowned. . . ."

They circled about her, condoling and exhorting; the air filled with their flying laughter and winged taunts.

"How about the coal hole on four paws, Jill?"

"How about a couple of sonnets on the Democratic Platform?"

"How about the snow-scene from 'East Lynne'?"

"Kit, help me get these tubs out of the way—in about two minutes someone's going to fall spang into one!"

"How about the sextette from 'Lucia'?"

"Sherry, are you shaking that thing again? Move over, I want to fix this up for the ring and the flour."

"Hey, wait a minute, there's an idea for you! Instead of each having to cut for it, let's make Jill burrow for the ring! How about that for a forfeit!"

"Doug, you're simply a genius!" Hanna sank back in the largest chair with a beatific sigh of relief. "I had a perfectly hideous picture of me turning all this water into dough."

"Me, too." Trudi was scrubbing vigorously with the resurrected handkerchief at a still dripping countenance, but the vigour of her tone was unimpaired. "The first time I did it I choked down the whole darn thing, ring and all. Thank God for Jill, sez I."

"It begins to sound as though you were elected, darling." Lindy hovered solicitously over the neat mound on the blue platter. "I'll just carve a little more away before I drop the ring—don't even breathe on it, Sherry."

"Lindy. . . ." Lindy, intent on her delicate task, smiled fleetingly in the direction of the low voice, too fleetingly to catch the piteous shadow in the blue eyes. "Lindy, couldn't you make it something else? Couldn't you, please? I'm so dreadfully clumsy at it. . . . If you'd let me try the sextette—or the snow scene——"

"Oh, Jill, shame!" The clamour swept relentlessly about her. "Begging off a forfeit!"

"You scandalous little coward!"

She parried desperately, "No, no, it isn't that I mind the flour—truly, it isn't that. Look, I'll do the coal-hole one. Wait till I pin my skirts back."

"But nobody wants you to do the coal-hole, duckie." Trudi's tone was both soothing and relentless. "All anyone wants you to do is to trot right up to the pretty

table and pick up the nice gold ring on the nice clean little white heap with your nice clean little white teeth. Now what could be fairer than that? Lindy, lend me that chiffon handkerchief of yours; it'll be perfectly elegant to tie her cunning little paws behind her back."

Lindy surrendered it without a backward glance, flicking a slice of the flour cake away with elfin precision.

"There, that's perfect! If she gives it one little touch with even the tip of her nose, it's going to be an absolute landslide!"

Trudi gave a final professional tweak, and stood clear, her hands outstretched.

"Circle, everyone! Circle, Larry! Make it wider—the child's likely to need air. Watch that clock, Sherry; don't forget that every minute gone means another year of single misery. Circle, children—she's off!"

The joyous faces swung by dizzily, the voices lifted to an exultant chant:

"'Swift, swift spins the magic ring
As one more year to the gods you fling . . .'"

"Jill! Jill, for the love of Pete, snap out of it!" "The girl's bewitched." "What in——"

The circle wavered, checked, broke, as Larry Redmond swung across the interval between it and the girl at the table.

"Jill, what is it? Don't, darling—don't . . . here, untie her hands, will you, some of you bright idiots? Jill!"

She wept, through those racking and dissolving sobs, "Oh, Larry, I've spoiled it again! It was such a beautiful party, and I've spoiled it again. Lindy, I did try—I did truly—I thought everything was so perfect, and I meant

not to; I thought if I just gritted my teeth and bent my head I could, but I kept seeing the ring—I kept seeing——"

She clung to Larry's sheltering arm, fast about her, trying to keep what she had seen far from her—trying in vain. There it stood on tiptoe in the candlelight, that mischievous truant from Eternity, all pearl and gold and starry laughter, with a wisp of drifting mist across its dancing eyes, and a wisp of drifting flour across its tilted nose . . . so young, so sweet, so terribly, terribly alive . . . someone in the broken circle sobbed suddenly, and Sunny and her ring were gone.

Chatty cried, "Oh Jill, we forgot; darling, we forgot that it was Sunny's ring. . . . It was my fault; I found it in with all those charms for the cake, and I gave it to Lindy without stopping to think at all—Jill, please, please forgive us."

Lindy said, "We've been trying so hard to forget how much we loved her all evening, Jill. . . . We won't try to pretend any more, darling, darling—we'll put the foolish things away."

Jill, stilling the quivering face, cried, "No, no, don't punish me for being such a little fool. Please let's go on with the games; I love the games, Lindy—I love your party. Don't punish me by spoiling it."

Trudi, brushing ring and flour together into the blue bowl, commented with grim determination,

"Well, here's one game we don't go on with. And personally, now that I'm no longer whooping like a Pawnee Indian, I feel as though a good rubber of contract and a hot-water bag are about my speed for the rest of the evening. I can recapture that first fine careless rapture for just so long and no longer; after that I begin to feel

like Methuselah's great-aunt. Stick this in the corner, Sherry, and haul out a couple of card tables. Grandma's ready to settle down for the night."

"Oh, Trudi, please——"

Lindy, pale and gracious, threw the desolate Jill her loveliest smile.

"But, darling, I do think Trudi's right. Let's all have a good game of cards—not bridge, that's much too stern and silent, but why don't we try poker?" She drew a long breath and said, still smiling, "Sunny never played that, so it won't have any unhappy memories at all. . . . There are enough for two tables, aren't there?"

Hanna murmured apologetically, "Oh, children, I'm dreadfully sorry, but I'd simply wreck any poker game in the world. I never can remember whether flushes are all the same number or all the same colour."

"Oh, but Hanna, neither can I!" cried Ray, enraptured. "And I'm always wanting to bet my immortal soul on three pair——"

Joel groaned fervently, "Three pair, great gods! Take her away from here before I do her violence—give her some marbles and a kite."

"Well, I can shoot craps better than almost anyone," proffered Ray, flushed but dauntless. "Couldn't we——"

Trudi swooped on the suggestion like a hawk. "Craps! Lead me to 'em! I've been wanting to shoot craps for six months. Wha dem bones? Chatty, you talk to 'em powerful pretty, too. Come on, Sheridan, find me a couple of bones. How about you and Larry, Jill?"

Jill asked in a small voice of desolation, "Lindy, aren't we going to have any more of the old games? I won't be such a little fool again, I promise. Aren't we going to have even Hide in the Dark? It won't be the

March Hares unless we have one game of Hide in the Dark."

"Of course we'll play it, if you want, darling. We'll just fill in with this till twelve, and the minute the clock strikes we'll forget everything in the world except that we're the only real March Hares in captivity. Trudi, you take your crap-shooters off in the corner, and all the children who are poker players gather round here. Doug, Joel, Kit, Gavin, and me—you, too, Tom? That's six, isn't it? Heavens, am I the only lady? Now where in the world did I put those cards the last time we were here?"

Chatty, burrowing industriously in the closet by the fireplace, announced in muffled tones:

"Here are the dice and some poker chips and a lot of score pads, all in a red lacquer box, but there isn't a single card. Didn't we take them back to town for bridge, Lindy? Or maybe we——"

Kit Baird said casually from the corner, "I think I stuck a pack or so into my bag last week. Shall I dash upstairs and see whether they're still there?"

"Oh, Kit, do! We'll be counting chips while you're gone."

Doug King, something dark moving across his blond, handsome face, lifted the highball glass to his lips, his eyes, curiously eager, following the red head until it disappeared in the shadows of the hall. When he put the glass down it was empty, and he was smiling.

Across the room Trudi's voice rose clear and fervent above the violent chatter of the kneeling circle, "Ah, babies, many's the day since we three got together! I'm askin' you sof' an' low, babies, be good to momma. Come you seven! Seven! Oh, what in——"

Gavin Dart, stacking the tri-coloured counters in neat piles, raised his voice over the waning lamentations.

"What's this famous game that we're to play at midnight, Lindy? A variation of Blindman's Buff?"

"Hide in the Dark?" The deft fingers hovered for a moment over the chips. "Oh, no, it's just what it says—we hide in the dark. At least one of us does, and the rest of us hunt."

"It's a grand game," commented Joel with a reminiscent grin that broadened to a chuckle. "Wait till the little helpmate hears about it; she'll fall flat on her face in a faint when she finds out how she's going to wind up the evening. Trudi—hey, Trudi, tell Ray what she has to do when she plays Hide in the Dark, will you?"

"And just what does she have to do?" Gavin Dart's voice was patience itself, enthroned on a monument.

"Oh, Gavin, I'm so sorry—it's this hideous way we all have of talking at once! Well, it couldn't be simpler. When the clock strikes twelve, we all race like mad to the hall at the top of the house—all but the Hider, that is—turning out the lights behind us as we go—so that the house will be pitch black, you see. Then the timekeeper counts noses, to see we're all there, and strikes a gong on the landing. He allows three minutes for the Hider to find cover, and when time's up he strikes the gong again as a warning that we're coming—and we're off. Every man for himself—and every lady, too! No one's allowed to say a word to anyone else, and as soon as each one discovers the Hider, he crawls into the same hiding place, and keeps perfectly still. The last one to unearth the quarry is Hider the next time, and so on, *da capo*, till we drop in our tracks.

"And, boy, wait till you see the places they take to!" adjured Joel fervently. "Remember the time Trudi popped into the bathtub and pulled a sheet over her,

and not one human being found her for two hours and thirty-five minutes?"

"It took longer than that to dig Hanna out of that dumbwaiter at the Randalls'," Doug reminded him, tilting back in his chair with a broad grin. "She couldn't stand up straight for a week afterward and she had ten blisters working the ropes up and down five stories."

Gavin, smiling appreciatively, said, "It sounds a most admirable game. Hanna in a dumbwaiter! I can hardly wait to get at it. If Baird doesn't find those cards perhaps we could just run through a practice game——"

Kit's voice said from the shadows in the hall, "Sorry to disappoint you; they were there all right. Better count 'em, Joel, while I join Mr. King in destroying this bottle of whiskey. Or have you staked out an indefinite claim on it, Doug?"

Doug, his teeth glittering under the narrow line of blond moustache, pushed the bottle toward him, saying genially, "I'll count 'em; Joel's stacking chips. Still keen on the cards, Kit?"

"Oh, not as keen as all that!" Kit detached the appraising eye that he was casting on the whiskey and permitted it to linger on the flushed countenance thrust jovially toward him.

Doug ran the cards from one hand to the other in a long, expert ripple of crimson, the smile deepening.

"But you still keep 'em handy on the train, just in case a game turns up?"

Kit put down the whiskey very gently, and said more gently still, "I'm going in for solitaire these days; I'm absolutely hell on solitaire."

Under the casual voices there rang suddenly a cold and ominous sound—the distant ring of rapier on rapier. . . . Lindy lifted startled eyes, and dropped them more

swiftly still. The gentle voice added, "Nothing like learning to play your own hand; I'll give you a lesson one of these days."

"Thanks." The crimson ripple broke abruptly, and Doug King reached for the whiskey. "And while you're giving lessons, why not show me just how you worked that hand in Panama——"

Joel cut sharply across the words, "When you get through playing with those cards, Doug, let the rest of us in on the game, will you? If you're done, we're ready to begin. Are they all there?"

Doug said blandly, "Fifty-two to a pack—entirely correct. Sorry to be such a bore with these ancient reminiscences; cut for the deal, will you?"

"Oh, Doug, before we start, do us some of the old tricks, won't you? It's been such ages since I've seen them! Do the butterfly one or the Queen of Hearts——"

Doug, shuffling with lightning dexterity, shook his head, laughing.

"After that crack from Joel about holding up the game? Not even for the Queen of Hearts herself, thanks! After everything's over, though, I'll stage a private exhibition for your special benefit, while we're having that little talk you promised me——"

Kit Baird raised a pair of indolently interested eyes; they lingered for a moment on the small frozen face across the table, and then returned, serenely inscrutable, to the cards before him.

"What stakes are we playing?"

"Well, let's make 'em high enough so that any goop with a pair of knaves can't call," suggested Joel, bitterly reminiscent. "I got into a ten-cent game last week——"

"How about table stakes, and a round of roodles after full house or better?" suggested Doug briskly.

"Jacks to open—dollar ante. That agreeable to everyone?"

Tom Ross pushed his chair back, remarking cheerfully, "It lets me out nicely; I'll shoot craps for a living. Five's a better game for straight poker, anyway."

Doug, shoving a group of stacks toward him, said genially, "Stick along—I'll stake you."

Tom pushed the chips carefully back, but the knuckles on his hand stood out starkly. He said quietly:

"Thanks; I'm not particularly keen about poker—nor charity either. See you later, Lindy. . . ."

Lindy, her eyes on the retreating figure, whispered incredulously, "Oh, but, Doug—Doug, how could you? You know how frightfully sensitive he is."

Doug, flicking the cards around the table in an ordered shower, said amiably, "I seem to be getting more popular around here every minute. Sorry, Lindy—I was doing my best, but obviously it's not good enough. I was under the impression that it was Joel who suggested high stakes."

"I didn't suggest the sky for the limit," said Joel. "However, no one here's kicking about your stakes, Doug; if they suit you, they suit us. . . . I'm taking one, and if anyone wants to know what I'm collecting, it's one-eyed Jacks."

"Three," said Kit, and added persuasively, "All pink."

Lindy, once more demurely wide-eyed, shook her head.

"I like these. They're the nicest cards I ever had in my life."

"One," said Gavin Dart.

Doug King announced, "Two to the dealer," shud-

dered violently at the result, and bent an inquiring eye on the ingenuous countenances turned to his.

"Open for five," Joel's voice sounded as though a great tragedy had come into his life.

"And up you five."

"See your ten, and up you ten."

"Gentlemen, hush!" Joel's voice was reverent. "You are now about to witness the battle of the giants. Mere mortals, including this one, will withdraw."

"I'll see those, Doug."

Doug spread a fan complacently before him—eight, nine, ten, jack, queen—and made a proprietary gesture toward the pot.

"Just a moment . . . just a moment, Doug, while I tender thanks and thanksgiving. All pink, old boy—ask, and you shall be given. Whose deal?"

Doug King shoved the pot in the direction of the smiling young man with a gesture curiously violent.

"Do they call you 'Lucky' Baird in the States, too? What was it that time—three to fill a flush?"

"Even so, Douglas; even so. Only one this time, though, if it's all the same to you."

"Drop."

"Two here."

"Open for twenty."

"And twenty more."

"Holy mackerel, have a heart, will you? What's a boy with a pair of treys doing in this outfit?"

"And up you ten."

Trudi's voice lifted plaintively from the corner:

"'I'll be blamed if I can see, my baby. . . .
I'll be blamed if I can see, my honey . . .
I'll be blamed if I can see

How all my money got away from me
This mornin'—this evenin'—so so-ooon.'"

"And twenty."

"See you."

"Three aces are better than three nines—or they used to be when I was a boy. Why not try walking round your chair, Doug?"

Doug, tilting the whiskey bottle at a sharp angle, once more displayed that even and disquieting glitter of teeth.

"Oh, I've a notion that it takes something more than that to win from Lucky Baird. Shove over another pile of those blues, will you, banker? Two cards, if it's all the same to you."

"'Duncan and his brother was playing pool,'" intoned the indefatigable Trudi,

"'When Brady came in acting like a fool;
He shot him once, he shot him twice,
Saying, "I don't make my living shooting dice!"
Brady won't come no mo-ore!
Brady won't come no more!
Brady won't come no mo-ore!
For Duncan shot Brady with a forty-four!'" . . .

"Let's ease into it with a five this time. What you doin', Bright Eyes?"

"'When the girls heard Brady was dead
They went up home, and put on red,
And came down town singing this song
Brady's struttin' in Hell with his Stetson on!'"

"And up you five."

"See you, and raise it five."

"And twenty."
"And up you ten."

"'Brady, where you at?
Brady, where you at?
Brady, where you at?
Strollin' through Hell in your Stetson ha-at!'"

"Full house, Dart; standing room only!"
"All yours, my dear fellow! Angels are certainly hovering over you to-night. Cards, Lindy?"
"Two."
"Kit! Kit Baird! Chatty wants 'Clinch Mountain.' Can you sing 'Clinch Mountain' and play poker?"
"My good girl, I can sing the Fifth Symphony and play poker. Ask Mr. King. . . . All right, Chatty, here's to you!"
The careless voice filled the room with its drifting and bitter charm.

"'Way up on Clinch Mountain
I wander alone;
I'm drunk as the devil. . . .
Oh, let me alone!——'"

"Up you ten."
"And ten more."
The voice wandered too, mischievous and melancholy:

"'Jack o' diamonds, Jack o' diamonds,
I know you of old—
You done rob my pockets
Of silver and gold!
I know you of old, boy,
I know you——'"

Doug King, leaning heavily on the table, said more heavily still, "Lord, you're an ungrateful beggar! I understood in Panama that he lines your pockets instead of robbing them——"

Kit tilted his chair back, lifting a warning hand to quell the rising turbulence in Joel's expressive countenance.

"Easy, old boy. . . . King, you seem to have Panama on your mind this evening. Is there anything you'd especially like to tell us about its flora, fauna, or local head-dresses before we go on? We'll hold up the game until you can give us your undivided attention, if you'd rather."

"No, no. It'll keep." Doug's voice was once more geniality itself. "We want to save something for a rainy day, you know—and it looks to me as though to-morrow were going to be good and rainy. One card."

"That being the case," said the red-headed young man, mildly regretful, "the command is forward! Dealer takes three. Don't tell me we've lost all our other playmates!"

"You lost two of 'em before the draw," said Joel Hardy, contemplating his cards gloomily. "You'd have lost three, if I'd had any sense." He bent a look of some intensity on the apparently oblivious Douglas. "Speaking of playmates and foreign parts, Kit, Larry told me about that Polish offer. I hope to the Lord you're going to give it two thoughts before you turn it down; it means New York a good bit, you know, and there are a few of your playmates who would rather enjoy having you around again."

Kit lashed him that brief and unforgettable smile. "Thanks—I've given it two thoughts. One before the game started and one since. I'm taking the Polish job. . . . You opening this thing, Doug?"

For once Lindy was not quick enough with the concealing lashes; from the lifted eyes there flashed something so winged and dazzling that Doug King, glancing up in time to catch it squarely, drew back as though it had been a buffet in his face.

After a moment he said evenly, "Open for ten."

"And up you ten," retorted Kit, permitting himself a smile of ingenuous pleasure.

"And twenty."

"And twenty more."

Doug King stared down at the blank green space before him where the red and blue and white piles had stood like soldiers so short a time ago. He reached his hands toward the gay clutter in the centre of the table.

"I'll go shy," he said briefly. "See your twenty and up you thirty."

"'On what strange meat hath this our Cæsar fed, That he is grown so great?'" inquired the red-headed young man with interest. "Now is it just possible that he has them?" He slid another little pile into the clutter, his eyes dancing. "Let's see what kind of a hand makes you carry on like that, Doug?"

"Straight, ace high."

He flung them on the table carelessly enough, but the light blue eyes that met the dark blue ones across the table were not careless.

Kit remarked in a voice tenderly commiserative, "One ace isn't high enough, old boy; I've got three." He laid them delicately on the table before him, and let two others flutter after them. "And a pair of paltry little fives thrown in for luck. . . . Games of skill are what you ought to go in for, not games of chance. Take slapjack, now——"

Doug burst into a sudden laugh—a laugh so expan-

sively contagious that even Joel's tense, dark face relaxed.

"I'll take another Scotch, if it's all the same to you. God, what a run of luck! . . . All right, all right, I know when I'm through, boys and girls; I didn't know that there was as much money in the world as I've lost in twenty minutes!" He drew the cards toward him with mock awe. "Three aces, no less—I've forgotten what three aces look like. Beautiful as the morning, aren't they?" He pushed his chair back with an emphatic thump. "Well, here's where you all see the best trick I do—transformation of well-known poker player into champion apple-roaster. The rest of you roisterers can go it without me. I know when I'm licked. Check in the morning for you, Kit. These the sticks for the apples, Lindy?"

"Yes—we'll all help; you've had enough, too, haven't you, Gavin?" Her voice sang; her eyes sang, too. "Just as soon as we cash these in——"

Doug fingered the tip of the stick critically "This thing's too blunt to go through any apple in the world, and my pocket knife's upstairs, confound it. Where's that dinky thing I was trying to cut the ham with? That was good and sharp."

"Trudi, darling, where did you put the silver?"

"Back in the cabinet by the window. We're settling up over here, too; I'm starving to death. Don't tell me all that gold and silver belongs to you, Chatty Ross!"

Doug, knife in hand, stood leaning negligently against the back of his chair, eyes more intent on the stacks mounting under Kit's long fingers than on the stick that he was whittling.

"Quite a killing, my lad! What did you clear? Five hundred?"

"Seven hundred and forty, if I'm correct. I haven't seen whether it balances yet."

"And you're the only winner?"

"No, no; it comes closer to making you the only loser. Joel's a couple of hundred ahead, Dart's dropped about seventy-five, and as far as I can make out, Lindy broke pretty nearly even. It begins to look as though you gave the party."

"It began to look that way to me some time back," said Doug King amiably. He leaned forward to inspect the neat rows of figures that were blossoming under Kit's fingers—there was a quick spurt of red and the stick fell to the ground with a clatter. "Oh, double damn that thing!" He flung the knife on the table with a sharp grimace, and bent his head to the damaged thumb. "Lord, I'll say it was sharp! I'm darned lucky it didn't take it off."

Joel said in a voice untinged by any very marked sympathy, "If you don't stop waving it around like that you're apt to wreck all these cards. You've got some blood on one of 'em."

Doug, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket with one hand, made a valiantly unsuccessful effort to staunch the blood. "No, that's no go; Lindy, lend a hand, will you? If you catch it right below the knuckle it'll make a kind of tourniquet."

Lindy, teeth deep in her lip, stretched out a hand, shuddered, and turned away. "Oh, Doug, I—simply can't. I'm so dreadfully, dreadfully sorry."

The handkerchief with its ugly crimson pattern fluttered to the table, and Doug stood staring ruefully at the abandoned thumb.

"My fault, my dear; I clean forgot how you felt about

it. As a matter of fact, the thing's pretty deep; I suppose I'd be a plain fool not to clean it out before I bandage it. I'll just dash upstairs, fix it up, and be back before any of you know it." He swept up the handkerchief, waved a gallantly reassuring hand, and was gone.

Kit, drawing the edge of the knife across his thumb, remarked pensively, "He was quite correct about its being sharp. Still and all . . . "He sat staring at it appraisingly for a moment before he put it back, and rose leisurely to his feet. "Doug, the deft and dexterous, slicing his finger to the bone and dropping stick, knife, and handkerchief before you could materialize as much as a white rabbit. . . . How come? How come? . . . It's quite all right, Lindy, you can look up—there's not a sign of the tragedy left, not so much as——" He checked sharply for a moment, staring down at the place where the red-flecked handkerchief had lain, and then continued evenly, "not so much as a single drop of blood."

Joel, sweeping the chips into the red lacquer box, remarked with some acerbity, "I don't know yet why he made such a roar and racket over how deep it was. It looked to me as though he hadn't even got a good nick out of his knuckle! Think he was making a grandstand play at you, Lindy?"

Lindy, sorting the cards into two neat stacks, murmured with a palely valiant smile, "Oh, I hardly think he'd choose blood as a short cut to my heart. . . . I'm glad it wasn't deep."

Kit, his eyes still on the table, quoted pensively, "'Not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough—'twill serve'. . . . Whither bound, Ray?"

Ray, halfway to the door, called back, "After some aspirin; my head's simply splitting—it's this everlasting wind."

"Are we going to have to sharpen this whole pile of sticks before we can use them?"

Lindy cast an apprehensive glance at the knife.

Joel, kneeling to examine the points, answered blankly, "They're sharp as nails, every last one of them. He picked the only blunt one of the lot. By heck, I said it was a dodge! Now just what——"

Kit, drawing a leisurely finger tip over the green space before him, said absently:

"I've got some iodine up in my room; I rather think I'll play the good Samaritan and pass it along. . . . As he says, this might turn out to be dangerous."

He smiled down into the shadowed questions that were Lindy's eyes and was gone, on feet silent and unhurried.

For a moment the group at the table sat staring after him, behind the straining eyes something stirring, something chilled and startled and disturbed, something dark, that followed him into darkness. . . . It was Joel who broke the silence with an impatient shrug and a not particularly reassuring laugh.

"If we all crouch around here listening to this blasted wind much longer we'll get as cuckoo as that child wife of mine. Good-night, listen to it! The damn thing sounds as though it came tearing straight up out of hell. . . ."

They listened, turning their faces to the frantic clamour soaring now to a higher pitch of frenzy and despair . . . higher . . . higher . . . higher still. Lindy sprang to her feet, pushing the table from her.

"Who's going to stir up these embers? Trudi, aren't

you and your cutthroats through? It's getting on to twelve, and not a soul has even started the chestnuts."

Trudi, checking glumly on expert fingers, groaned aloud. "Sherry, you poor lout, how even you could lose six dollars and eighty-five cents as fast as that is beyond me!" She swept the pile of silver into Larry's predacious palm. "Where's that warming pan for the chestnuts? Joel Hardy, what are you skulking around the outskirts for—got a rendezvous? Turn out the blaze of glory while you're over there, will you? I'm all through with the lights and the music; what I'm after from this on is cosseting and peace."

Joel reached abstractedly for the switch, and the room sank gratefully back into firelight and shadow.

"I was just trying to make up my mind whether to chase upstairs and see how the hospital ward was getting on," he remarked to the group that had already forgotten to listen. "Did Ray say she was—— Oh, hello, Kitten! I was just going up. Headache better?"

The little figure across the dark threshold said, "No" in a strange voice that didn't belong to Ray at all, and then moved swiftly forward, clutching at him with hands that were ice cold even through the comforting warmth of his coat.

"Joel, Joel, take me away from this place."

"Look *out!*" shrieked Trudi above the firelit laughter, "you'll have every last one in the ashes if you tilt it like that—there! Doggone you, Sheridan, not even a nut's safe with you. Where's the tongs? If you take the fire shovel——"

"Ray, for the love of the Lord, what's the matter with you? Stop chattering your teeth like that; what is it, a chill?"

"No . . . no. Joel, we've got to get away; we've——"

"What do you mean, get away? Darling, you're completely off your head; I'll bet you've taken half that bottle of aspirin. Look, come over to the fire, and I'll tuck you up on a cushion."

"I haven't t-touched any aspirin. It was all dark. I —took the wrong turn. . . . Joel, don't make me stay here. D-don't . . . don't——"

She clung to him, drawing him deeper into the shadows, hysteria chattering behind that frantic whisper.

Joel put reassuring arms about her, his face swept with relief and mirth.

"Did something frighten my poor child? Did she hear a wicked little ghost? Well, I won't let any ghost that ever walked touch one hair of that blessed little cracked head of yours! Ray, you'll be the death of me yet."

"It wasn't the ghost. I heard . . . I——" She twisted in his arms with a sudden convulsive energy. "Joel, listen; if you get the car, we can slip out the back way without anyone seeing us. We can get to Washington in two hours; we can——"

He gripped her shoulders, his voice suddenly stern. "Ray, what in God's name are you talking about? You heard Kit Baird tell you that the bridge was down between here and Washington."

"He said there was a place where you could ford; he did, he did—I heard him tell Lindy. . . . Hurry, hurry——"

Joel gave her a vicious shake.

"Be quiet, you little lunatic—someone will hear you. If you think that just because you have some insane maggot in your brain about ghosts and graveyards you can——"

She said, "Joel, listen to me—you've got to listen to me. Something frightful's going to happen here; some-

thing frightful's happening now. . . . Listen——" She threw back her head, and asked in a thread of a voice from which everything was frozen but terror, "What's that?"

"What's that? Of all the——"

"That . . . That noise. Hush!"

He listened, frowning and intent, straining his ears above the crying wind, the voices from the hearth . . . his face relaxed into grim mirth.

"It's Kit Baird, whistling. Is that a portent of evil, according to you?"

It came nearer—nearer—clear and careless and piercingly, effortlessly sweet—Lindy's song, seeking her down dark corridors.

"'Down in the valley
The valley below. . . .
Hang your head over,
Hear the wind blow!'"

Lindy, warm in the firelight, turned a face of still magic to greet it, but the girl in the shadows did not turn.

"'Hear the wind blow, dear,
Hear the wind blow . . .'"

"Is he—alone?"

"Good grief, how do I know whether he's alone? Now, listen, Ray, and get this straight. I love you to distraction and I've never had a quarrel with you yet, but I want to tell you here and now that if you keep up this lunacy, and insult my friends by any more nonsense about clearing out of here to-night, I'll never forgive you as long as I live. Understand?"

She whispered, "Oh, Joel—oh, Joel—you'll never forgive yourself as long as you live," and pushed by him toward the fire without a backward glance.

Kit Baird called from the shadow beyond his shoulder:

"Making love to your wife again? Lord, what an old-fashioned lot we are!" . . . He slipped an affectionate arm across the other's shoulders, demanding gaily, "Got any forbidden fruit for a pair of good boys, you over there?"

There was a mild clamour of greeting and much shifting and manœuvring of sofa cushions.

"Here, Joel!" "What's wrong, Ray—see a ghost up there?" "Next to me, Kit. I've got your guitar, and a drink and an apple and everything ready." "Move over, Larry—that's the boy!"

The girl on the far side of the red-headed young man, holding her hands toward a fire that left them colder, asked in a small frozen voice, "Where is—Doug?"

"Doug? Didn't anyone tell you about the big accident, Ray? The wounded hero is still sulking in his tent. . . . I rather gathered that he wanted you, Lindy."

Lindy, the firelight painting roses in her face, turned dark eyes of wonder toward him.

"Wanted me? But what in the world for? He knows that I'm perfectly hopeless about cuts and bandages."

"Still, I think he wants you." . . . He struck a long chord of silver lamentation on the guitar. "Chatty, child, you aren't expecting us to start singing at this time of night, are you?"

"Oh, Kit, you stopped right bang in the middle of 'Clinch Mountain'—please finish it—please."

"Just this one then, since the Baird tribal motto is

never start anything you don't finish. What comes after 'Jack o' diamonds', Joel?"

"Rye whiskey," prompted Joel.

"Righto!" He flung his head back against the dark cushions and once more the music, gay and bitter, flooded the room:

> "'Rye whiskey, rye whiskey,
> You're no friend to me—
> You killed my old daddy—
> Now, damn you, try me!
> You may boast of yore——'"

A voice called from somewhere beyond the darkness that was the hall, the darkness that was the stairs: "Lindy!"

"You see, I was right," said the red-headed young man.

Lindy slipped to her feet, shaking out filmy draperies, her lips curved in rueful amusement.

"Curioser and curioser," she remarked in the little velvet voice. "I feel exactly like Alice—'How the creatures do order one about!' Still, as hostess——"

"Lindy!"

Something in that distant summons caused her to drop the light words as though they were broken toys. She caught the scarf about her, called, "Coming!" clearly, and was gone on winged feet, leaving the group about the fire staring after her with expressions that ranged from blank bewilderment to unconcealed outrage.

"Well, of all the confounded gall!" commented Joel Hardy. "Why didn't he whistle for her like a dog?"

"Possibly because a dog can't whistle." Kit Baird

smiled down inscrutably at his guitar. "Where were we?

"'You may boast of yore knowledge
An' brag of yore sense,
'Twill all be forgotten
A hundred years hence . . .
A—hundred—years—hence——'

And with that prudent reminder, comrades, I vote that we abandon the lute for the more serious business of the evening. Are all the lights out in the service quarters, Trudi?"

"Dunno; I'll cut around and make sure."

"Larry, you might see that that door at the back of the chapel's unlocked. What time is it, anyway?"

"About ten to twelve."

Hanna, who had been tranquilly peeling chestnuts into a little copper bowl, gave a sudden wail of dismay.

"Ten minutes to *twelve?* Oh, heavens, that's simply too dreadful. Gavin, I absolutely forgot that I'd told Mademoiselle that I'd call up to find out how Jeff's cold is."

Gavin said easily, "Well, my dear, that's no very harrowing catastrophe. We'll try the first thing in the morning; the little beggar was getting on all right when we left."

"No, no—I know perfectly well that she'll sit there till dawn waiting to hear from me; you know how appallingly conscientious she is. Do hurry; it ought to be easy to get a call through at this time of night."

"Then if someone will be good enough to show me where the phone is——"

"In that cubby hole to the right of the stairs." Joel followed him to the door. "Here, I'll turn the light on

for you out there. It's one of the old-fashioned kind; you know you have to turn that handle like a blooming barrel organ before you can raise central. Can you manage it?"

"Perfectly, thanks. Any other messages, Hanna?"

"Just that we'll surely be home late Friday night. Oh, and kisses for Jeff."

"Is it the handle at the side of the box that you mean, Hardy? Do you have to give any special signal?"

"No, just crank it like a Ford. What's the matter—can't you raise anyone?"

"Not a soul. Possibly I'm turning it the wrong way."

"Here, let me have a go at it. Maybe it'll recognize the old familiar touch. . . . No, sir—someone's asleep at the switch."

"Possibly they use carrier pigeons around these parts after eleven," suggested Kit helpfully.

"The darn thing's deader than the Dead Sea, if you ask me. Not a crackle out of it. See here, how about this storm?"

Jill cried, "Oh, but of course it's the storm! If it could pull up trees and tear down bridges, what couldn't it do to a telephone wire? Well, now we *are* marooned!" She added in the electrified silence, "Children, children, we won't be able to get anyone to fix the bridge!"

A small cold voice by the fire said, "No—not anyone. . . . Not anyone for anything. . . . We waited too long . . . now it's too late."

Trudi demanded sternly, "Is that little bird of evil omen at it again? Put a bag over her head, Joel! Personally, I've always ached to live in a house without a telephone for even five minutes. Come on back, Gavin, you won't make it work by looking dignified and reproachful. . . . Aha, the prodigal children back, and just about

in time, what's more. That clock's going to be tolling twelve before we know it. Were there any lights upstairs except the ones on the two landings, Lindy?"

Lindy, her face bent over the abandoned card table by the door, said in her exquisite and unruffled voice, "I'm not sure. Did you turn out the one behind you, Doug?"

Doug steadied himself with a hand on the sofa. Even in the firelight it was obvious that he was drunk with something headier than wine: he was swollen and flushed with some immense and secret triumph that made the earth itself reel beneath his feet.

He said, "Yes. Don't know about the others, though —thought I saw one down the third-floor landing."

Trudi announced solemnly, "Doug King, I've been waiting for this night ten years. The last time we were out here, you bet me that next time you were the Hider you'd find a place that I couldn't dig you out of for two hours. You bet me ten dollars. Does it stand?"

"It stands."

"Is this the next time?"

"This is the next time."

"You hear him, children—he's the Hider. Sure you understand the rules of this game, Gavin? You, Ray?"

The girl by the fire who could not warm her hands said, "Sure," and moved deeper into the shadows.

"All right, then. We'll put out this fire. Get that bucket, Kit, it still has some water in it. Swash it over those embers in the corner . . . we don't want even a glimmer."

The room plunged headlong into darkness, as though it had long been avid of it and could no longer wait.

Doug King, moving cautiously toward the figure

silhouetted against the window, whispered, "That you, Jill?"

She said, "Yes. . . . Why? What is it?"

"Whisper, will you? Listen, I want to try out that hiding stunt we planned last time—you know, the Purloined Letter stuff—the most obvious place in the house, where no one in God's world would think of looking. How about the big sofa in front of the fire?"

"Splendid. Oh, Doug, I've been trying all evening to get hold of you; there's something I simply have to ask you, something really important."

"All right, all right—later . . . only for the Lord's sake don't give me away! Make sure that the coast's clear before you come in. . . . Look out—there goes the clock."

Trudi's voice rose above the slow strokes like a trumpet calling to battle, "To the third landing, everyone. To the landing!"

"Hey, look out—that's not the way to the stairs!"

"Catch that light down by Jill's room, someone."

"Can't we even light a cigarette, Trudi?"

"Not a chance! All present and accounted for? Let's go!"

"Good-night, wait a minute: I can't even find the gong. Got a luminous dial on that watch of yours, Gavin?"

"All right, stand clear, everyone!"

The voices, drifting farther and farther away into the shadows, fell abruptly into silence, leaving the great room, waiting, transfixed, in a silence deeper still. One voice rose again.

"Three minutes from the time this gong strikes till it strikes again. Stand perfectly still, everyone. We can all hear, you know, even if we can't see. Now!"

It rang out with a long clang that was at once a warn-

ing and a menace, echoing and reverberating as though it would never have done . . . and suddenly was done, leaving something behind more disturbing than all its clamour.

Silence. . . .

Silence, with even the wind holding its breath to listen. . . .

Silence deeper than the darkness . . . the long, intolerable silence of suspended breath. . . .

Far away, from the landing, there was small sound of stifled laughter, a board creaked and the room, feeling something colder than the wind pass through it, shuddered, and was still. . . .

The gong! And instantly the night was filled again with sounds. The sound of small distant scurryings on the stairs, of hands brushing cautiously along panelled walls, of rebellious whispers trailing to silence. . . . The sound of furtive breathing; of less furtive stumbles; of a voice raised sharply in inarticulate protest; of a sudden and anonymous break of laughter. . . .

In the room feet ran light and swift, and were gone. . . something fell, with a frantic and unretrieved clatter. . . a voice said "Damn" softly, and another voice in the distance said "Hush-h-h" more softly still. Silence . . . and feet again . . . and silence.

In the darkness near the sofa there was a little stir, and a breathless murmur edged with laughter . . . and almost before the murmuring had faded someone screamed—frantically, appallingly, as though horror itself had found a tongue. It tore through the house like something alive and frenzied with terror, and from the house clamour rose to greet it.

Instantly the darkness was filled with running feet and voices running before them.

"Who is it?"
"What's the matter?"
"For God's sake, where are the lights?"
"Make her stop, make her stop, can't you?"
"Oh, God, can't anyone find those lights?"
And suddenly someone had found the lights. . . .

Jill Leighton was standing quite still by the sofa, her hands thrust stiffly in front of her, staring straight ahead with dreadful and distended eyes. The hands were red from finger tip to knuckle, from knuckle to wrist . . . and she was staring straight at the ghastly huddle that had been Douglas King.

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The group in the doorway stood staring at her like lunatics frozen in a nightmare, tranced in incredulous horror, staring at the red hands stretched out stiffly as a doll's—staring at what lay beyond them. . . . Upstairs a door slammed, there was a quick clatter on the stairs, and someone shouted peremptorily: "Hey, what's the racket down there? Holding a mass meeting?"

Kit Baird said in a low voice, "Shut up, you fool," and Larry asked quietly from the hall, "Is something wrong?"

The voice from the stairs inquired in tones of startled indignation: "How do you get that way? What's going on down there anyway?"

Chatty Ross, clinging to the table by the door, said in a flat little monotone:

"It's Jill—Jill Leighton. She's killed Doug King."

And the girl with the red hands screamed again, straining frantically to push them farther from her.

Larry Redmond, shouldering his way through the huddled figures, said as quietly as before, "Stand still, darling. Close your eyes—don't try to move. That's my girl." He took the dreadful little hands in his, wrapping his handkerchief about them, lifted her in his arms, and swung to confront the faces, still frozen in the dark doorway: "I gather you'd have stood there and let her go stark, staring mad before your eyes! You're a fine crew, I'll say that for you." He stood, surveying them

with a bitter and icy contempt. "Get a glass of water, someone."

Sherry reached out and poured it blindly, the glass chattering against the lip of the pitcher, unheeded and unrestrained, while he remarked in a voice that wavered and slipped abruptly from control, "Well, this is s-some party, I'll tell the world. S-some party."

He put the pitcher down with a crash, and turned his face to the wall, his shoulders heaving.

It was Lindy who retrieved it and carried it across the floor. It was filled to the brim, but not a drop spilled; and though she was whiter than the girl in Larry's arms, the voice of silver and dreams was as unshaken as her hand. She said gently, "Put her down there, Larry—in the chair, that way. See, she hasn't fainted: she's all right." She knelt, slipping a hand behind the tawny head, holding the glass to the blanched lips. "Darling, we didn't mean to frighten you. It was just that people in a nightmare don't move or act or speak like real people . . . and for a minute we were all in a nightmare. Drink this for Lindy—drink it for Lindy, because she loves you so."

Jill, staring over the rim of the glass with the eyes of a desperate child, whispered through the stiffened lips: "Lindy, I thought he was asleep. . . . Lindy, I thought he was asleep and I tried to wake him. . . . I tried——"

She pushed the glass from her, a terrible revulsion contracting her face, and buried her head on Lindy's shoulder, shaken with something more dreadful than tears.

Larry asked, his eyes still gray ice, "Who was in this room at the time the lights went on? Incidentally, just why were the lights turned on?"

Kit, leaning against the door jamb, inquired with

mild interest, "Are you the Prosecutor, Larry? Jill screamed—didn't you hear her?"

"No; I was out near the linen press on the second floor. The first thing that I heard was Joel shouting from the stairs, and I came on down past him. Were you all standing where you are now when the lights went up? Who turned them up?"

Kit suggested equably, "Ask us one thing at a time; some of us might get rattled."

"Were you all here when the lights went on?"

"To the best of my belief, all of us that are here now were here when the lights went on. But we aren't all here now, are we?"

"Who's missing?"

"Well, I don't see Ray Hardy, for one. And for another, Gavin Dart."

Hanna, who had been standing immobile, her golden head thrown back against the white-panelled wall, stirred at the sound of the name as though waking from some deep dream, gave a little sigh, and crumpled quietly to her knees.

Trudi demanded drearily, "Now what in the name of Heaven did she do that for? Hanna!" She knelt, shaking her gently. "It's no good; she's passed out absolutely; cold as ice, too. Sherry, if you're tired of acting like a two-year-old infant, you might hand me some whiskey in a glass, and I'll see whether I can wedge it between her teeth."

Sherry, shaken and humble, brought her the little tumbler. "Trudi, I'm sorry I'm such a fool, but it was because I remembered all of a sudden how we'd been going target shooting before breakfast, and the way he was kidding me about my tie—that purple one, you know. . . . I'm sorry, honey——"

She cried in a tone of strange, constrained violence, "Oh, Sherry, for God's sake! Stop gabbling, will you, and find Gavin Dart? Hanna's liable to go completely off her head when she comes out of this, and I'd a good deal rather have Gavin around."

Larry Redmond strode by them, his eyes the eyes of a crusader, stern with some secret purpose.

"I'll get them. Dart! Gavin Dart!"

A voice from somewhere far away in the service quarters called distantly, "Coming!" and Joel turned mechanically toward the stairs.

"I'll hunt up Ray, and see that she turns in. It's going to be rotten enough for her anyway, poor kid, but I'll appreciate anything any of you can do to keep her out of it as much as possible."

Larry, barring the doorway with an outstretched arm, said implacably:

"Unfortunately, none of us can do anything whatever; she is quite as much involved as anyone here. Nor can you hunt her up, as you put it; there are going to be no more private conferences here to-night, I can assure you. If you have any communications to make to your wife, you'll make them in the presence of witnesses."

Joel, his dark, charming face livid with the enraged astonishment that all but extinguished his voice, stammered furiously: "Have you g-gone off your head? Who in hell do you think you are, anyway? And who in hell do you think you're talking to?"

Larry replied with ominous distinctness, "To one of the disinterested little group that was trying to pin this unspeakable thing on the girl that I intend to marry. And if you think I've gone off my head, just try to pin it on her again!"

Gavin Dart inquired pleasantly from the door to the left of the fireplace: "Anyone call me?"

His eyes, penetrating and alert, reached the sofa. . . . After a long moment he asked, unmoving:

"What is it? An accident?"

Kit, as motionless as he said evenly, "Hardly. . . . It's murder. Your wife has fainted."

The man in the doorway came forward instantly, passing within an inch of the sofa with its dreadful burden.

Trudi glanced up; in the pitiless brilliance of the light it was easy to see the dark rings about her eyes. "She's coming to; she'll want you, Gavin."

Gavin Dart, kneeling beside her, said, "You say that she fainted? That's absolutely unlike Hanna; I've never known her to faint in her life. But I suppose this came as a simply appalling shock?"

Kit, his blue eyes burning black in his colourless face, remarked in a voice detached as judgment itself, "She didn't faint because of this, if you mean Doug King's murder. She fainted when she heard that you weren't here. . . ." He took his hands from his pockets, crossing the threshold of the hall in one long stride. His eyes had not once moved from the sofa; they did not move from it now. "As a matter of fact, however, we've rather neglected to establish that there's been a murder. Or if it comes to that, whether there's even been a death. Is anyone here up on post-mortems or ante-mortems, if necessary?"

Tom Ross loosed the despairing clutch of Chatty's fingers. "I shouldn't think that you'd need to be qualified as an expert to see that the poor devil's dead. But if it's necessary, I was two years with the Ambulance. . . . Don't look, Chatty."

He moved forward, a muscle quivering suddenly and strongly in his cheek, and Gavin Dart remarked quietly over his shoulder, "I'd disturb everything as little as possible, if I were you, Ross."

"It won't be necessary to disturb anything." For a moment the black of shoulders blotted out the horror on the sofa, then he straightened, wiping his hands carefully, a little line of sweat outlining the taut lips.

"He's stone dead, of course. A knife thrust just above the collar."

"From the back?"

"No, from the side. It got the jugular."

"Gavin . ." The lightest of whispers, but in the silence that came flooding back over the room after each voice ceased, it was audible as a cry, "Gavin, they said you'd gone."

He answered, bending to catch the whisper, "Not gone; just that I hadn't come."

Hanna said, turning her bright head from side to side, as though it hurt her, "I thought—I thought they said that you had gone. . . . Don't go."

"I'll not go." He spoke as gently as though she were an ailing child. "Now try to stand up; put your hand on my shoulder—see, it's quite easy. Joel, pull that chair over to this corner, will you? No, the back to the fire . . . thanks. Better, now, aren't you?"

"Am I?" The great eyes in the marble of her face stared at him blankly, drained even of wonder. "Gavin, was it—Doug?"

"Yes, dear."

"Is he—dead?"

"Yes, dear."

"Doug!" She moved the bright head again restlessly.

"I do think that's rather funny, don't you? . . . Don't you think that's rather funny, Gavin?"

"Don't try to talk, dear. Just put your head back, and close your eyes. I'll be here beside you; if you put out your hand you can touch me. I won't go again where you can't put out your hand and touch me."

Joel remarked bitterly from the door:

"Now that you've all quite finished, I'm going after Ray. For all any of you know, or care either, she may be dead, too. If I have to have a guardian I'll be obliged if you'll select someone that will have enough rudimentary decency not to frighten a girl who is already half crazed with fright into nervous prostration. And in spite of any dictatorship set up here by any mortal soul under the canopy, she's not going to put one foot in this room until you get that—until you get Doug out of it."

Larry said icily, "She is not one atom more immune from suspicion than the girl that you were willing to torture into insanity because of your rank disqualification to recognize innocence when you're confronted with it. She'll join that girl here the moment that we can put our hands on her, and you'll be good enough to refrain from dictating the conditions under which she'll do it."

Joel shouted, his voice convulsed with rage:

"You poor damned fool, Ray never laid eyes on Doug before to-night in her life! Get out of my way and keep out of it."

Larry, not moving a fraction of an inch, said:

"But you had laid eyes on Doug before to-night, hadn't you, Joel? And Ray is your wife. Even Cæsar's wife wasn't above suspicion, was she? . . . Suppose we go and look for Ray together."

"Larry, you're simply out of your head." Trudi rose

slowly to her feet, chalk-faced but level-eyed. "Not one human being has said a word to Jill. Chatty answered your question by blurting out the first thing that came into her head; her mind probably wasn't functioning any better than yours is—or than mine is, for that matter. I'll go with Joel and look for Ray; if she's in any condition to come down, we'll bring her. If she isn't, she can wait upstairs till we decide on the next move. . . . Is Jill all right, Lindy?"

Lindy asked softly, "Better, darling?" and the girl in the deep chair nodded a listless head, tried to smile reassurance, and gave it up as though it were hardly worth the effort. She lay back against the cushions like a broken doll, her eyes fixed on Hanna, immobile in her corner by the window.

Lindy, dropping a kiss light as a moth on the ruffled hair, turned to the group still clustered in the doorway.

"What should we do now?" she asked, and at the quiet magic of that voice, direct and clear as a child's, the madness that had been hovering over the room with black and dreadful wings lifted them, and its shadow withdrew slowly from their eyes.

Chatty, clutching at Tom's arm as though she were drowning, burst suddenly into a flood of terrified and cleansing tears.

"Oh, Lindy, Lindy, Larry's so dreadfully angry with us—he talks to us as though he hated us, and didn't know us at all. Jill, darling, I didn't mean it—Jill, I do love you; don't let him be so angry——"

Jill whispered:

"Don't cry, Chatty. Larry, tell Chatty you're sorry that you made her cry."

Larry, his face contorting in a sudden grimace of

intolerable pain, said in a voice harsh with the effort he made to control it:

"Sorry, Chatty. Sorry, Joel. Sorry, all the rest of you. You're right; I'm half mad. You see I thought you were all out to get Jill."

He sat down abruptly in the nearest chair and dropped his head in his hands. After a moment he said indistinctly though his meshed fingers, "Trudi's perfectly right about Ray, of course. But I think for her own sake that she ought to be here from now on if she's up to it. . . . Not that it makes much difference what I think."

"Joel probably under-rates her capacity for endurance," remarked Trudi bitterly. "It's a habit of the stronger sex. . . . Let's go, shan't we?"

"Trudi, don't—don't let that poor child be dragged down here if she's afraid to come." Lindy moved swiftly forward, the low voice shaken for the first time. "You know perfectly well it's simply impossible that she had anything in the world to do with—with Doug's——"

Trudi replied briefly over her shoulder, "I'll look out for her. Coming, Joel?"

The dark eyes, disturbed and pitiful, followed them into the shadows of the hall. After a moment she murmured under her breath unhappily, "Oh, but that poor baby . . . afraid even of the wind! Surely, surely there must be some other way——"

Kit stretched out a warning hand, catching back the long end of the tulle scarf that she was twisting through her fingers

"Careful, Lindy; there's blood on those violets of yours."

She echoed in a tenuous thread of horror: "Blood?" Her eyes did not go to the violets—they flew across the

space that separated her from the green-frocked girl deep in the winged chair, and at what she saw there something shrank and contracted under the velvet pallor of her skin. "Oh—while I was bending over with the water, of course. . . . Cut them off, will you, Kit? And throw them away somewhere—somewhere that I can't see them." She stood rigid as a small statue under his swift fingers, only the flickering of her lashes betraying her desperate recoil. "Jill, darling, would you rather take the dress off, or just slip a smock on over it for now? That's her smock—the green one there in the corner, Larry. . . ."

Larry rose stiffly to his feet, staring about him as though he were seeing the room for the first time.

"Just keep your eyes closed while I get it, darling. Where did you say, Lindy? Yes, I see. . . . That's my brave girl."

Jill asked, "Is there blood on me, Larry?"

"Only a little, darling; it's all covered now—you can open your eyes."

She said in that small, formal voice more terrifying than any frenzy: "Thank you; do I have to?"

"No, dear, no."

"Then I think I won't, if you don't mind."

She sketched again the dreadful little parody of a smile with lips too stiff to curve, and was silent.

Larry Redmond stood staring down at her, something quivering behind the rigidity of his face. After a moment he turned to the group by the door.

"Look here, we can't keep this up, and that's flat. We're none of us going to be able to get at this thing with any sanity or decency while—while Doug's still here in the room. I don't consider myself particularly high-strung, but it simply shoots the earth out from

under me every time that I look over in that direction, and it's not pleasant to imagine what it must be for the girls. Isn't there any way that we can get him out before Trudi brings Ray down?"

Sherry cried, "Oh, for God's sake, let's not stand here any longer talking about it—let's get at it. Here, Tom, you lend a hand."

Tom said in a carefully controlled voice:

"How about the police? They'll have it in for any of us that mess things up around here, won't they?"

"Ah, to hell with the police!" yelled Sherry, his voice suddenly strained to frenzy. "Where do the police come in on this? We aren't in Scotland Yard or the Morgue, as far as I know! We're in Lady Court, and that thing on the sofa there isn't just a corpse in a story—it's Doug—it's Doug King, and we're us, not a lot of poor damned puppets in a melodrama. If we've got to spend the rest of the night in this infernal room, I'm going to get Doug out of here into that chapel, and if any of the rest of you think I'm going to be sent up to the electric chair for it, you can keep your mouths shut and steer clear of me from now on! Come on, let's get started."

"Sherry, wait." Lindy's fingers were on his wrist, but it was her voice, not the light fingers, that held him. "This is Lady Court, as you say . . . and you are one of my guests here. Sherry, you do see, don't you, that I simply can't permit you to jeopardize the safety of my other guests by doing anything that we shouldn't do, no matter how dreadfully, dreadfully we may want to do it? . . . Gavin, you said that you knew a good deal about police work, didn't you?"

"Quite a bit, yes."

"Then won't you help us now, please? Would it be possible to do what Sherry suggests?"

Gavin, in the far corner where he stood guard over the motionless Hanna, stood motionless, too, for a moment, with contracted brows. When he spoke it was with a trifle more than his customary deliberation.

"Naturally, the police are going to object violently to the obliteration of any possible clues. But as it appears to be highly problematic as to how soon we'll be able to get in touch with them, and as it certainly seems advisable to keep us confined to this room until certain facts are definitely established, I think that we'd be justified in taking matters more or less into our own hands."

"Until what facts are established?" inquired Kit Baird.

"Well, there's the weapon, of course; and then one of the first things that the police would try to ascertain is whether it might not possibly be a suicide."

"At least we'll be able to set their minds at rest on that score," said Tom Ross, something that was almost a smile passing over his haggard face.

"Something makes you entirely clear as to that?"

"Clear? Naturally I'm clear. Aside from half a dozen obvious reasons, there's the more than obvious one that Doug King had everything in God's world to make life worth living for the next hundred years!"

Neil Sheridan looked up swiftly. "That shows all you know! Doug was——"

"Larry!"

Joel's voice from the stairs sounded tired.

"Yes?"

"Just wanted to let you know that Ray went to her room right after the second gong struck, took some aspirin, and turned in. She was asleep, but she'll be down as soon as she can get some things on."

"Good kid," commented Larry briefly.

"She's a long sight gamer than I am," said Joel. His receding footsteps lagged even more than his voice. They had hardly died away as Gavin Dart asked in his pleasant, unstressed voice: "You were going to tell us something about Doug King, Sheridan?"

Something in that voice, for all its lack of emphasis, caused the loquacious Sherry to cast a startled glance in its direction. After a moment he said slowly:

"Well, you can't exactly say that he had everything. Just to-night while we were upstairs dressing he was telling me how sick and tired he was of all this rolling-stone stuff, and how he wanted to settle down somewhere and have a nice little home——"

The wintry smile once more flickered behind Tom Ross's eyes.

"Still, Sherry, you don't think that he cut his throat because he didn't have it, do you? I hardly think that any of us are going to be able to persuade the police of that! They're likely to look for a more substantial motive, and something tells me that they're not going to look for it from Doug."

"Of course there's another way of establishing that it's not a question of suicide," commented Gavin thoughtfully. "If there's no knife within reach of his hand——"

"It's murder," said Kit Baird. "There is no knife within reach of his hand."

"You sound fairly definite."

"I'm more than fairly definite. I've had an absolutely clear view from here of the sofa from the moment that the lights went on. There's no knife there."

"Did you notice a weapon of any kind when you were making your examination, Ross?"

"No." The little line of sweat edged the fine, sensitive lips once more. "Kit's right. There's no knife."

"Then if that's the case, the matter of posture isn't so important, and I think that we might risk moving him. Hanna, I'll not be more than a moment——"

Hanna, turning on him those immense, strange eyes that had been feeding tirelessly on space, said:

"I'll come, too."

"My dear child, there's nothing that you can do. If you'll just sit here quietly——"

She repeated, rising to her feet as though he had not spoken: "I'll come, too."

Her hand was on his arm, but she walked beside him erect and superb as any Grecian goddess, gold-sandalled and gold-crowned, moving through Olympian fields.

Lindy asked, "Gavin, mightn't it be a good idea to move the whole sofa without touching . . . anything? I'm quite sure that it will go through the chapel door. Two of you could take each end, couldn't you, while I hold the door open?"

"Lindy, that sounds to me like a real inspiration. I'm inclined to believe that you have the levellest head of any of us!"

She murmured with a small, forlorn smile and gesture of denial:

"Oh, I'm like the skyrocket in an emergency—I rise to the occasion in quite a burst of glory, but I come down like the skyrocket, too. . . . Please don't count on me. . . . Shall I hold it open now?"

"I hardly think that it's going to be necessary. If you'll just stay near Hanna for a minute I'll be more deeply in your debt than ever."

Hanna said: "Gavin, it isn't necessary for anyone

to stay with me. I'm sorry that I was so stupid, but that's all over now."

For all the magnificent tranquillity of her tone, she did not look quite all right; under the level brows her eyes stared out strangely on a strange world, the pupils so dilated that the flawless aquamarine was almost black.

Kit Baird, who had been standing looking down at the twisted handful of violets in his hand, straightened abruptly, tossed them carelessly into the basket at his feet, and lifted his eyes to the lovely lady by the table.

"What happened to the famous earrings, Hanna?"

She clapped startled hands to her ears, and then dropped them with a tremulous smile.

"Oh, Kit, for a moment I forgot! The screw's loose on one of them—it came off in my hand during supper, and I was afraid of its falling off somewhere in the dark while we were playing, so I dropped them both on my dressing table near the door as we went by on our way to the third floor. . . . Gavin, you aren't worried about me any more, are you? You must surely see that I'm quite, quite all right?"

He stood eyeing her, gravely solicitous for a moment, and then turned steadily to the ugly task before him.

"Very well. You and I at this end, Baird. Sheridan, I think you're better out of this for a bit. Ross at the other—and how about you, Redmond? Think you can swing it?"

"I've evidently managed to convey a flattering opinion of my qualifications in an emergency!" commented Larry Redmond with a grim twitch at the corner of his lips. "Not that I'm in any position to blame you! I'm not particularly given to hysterics, however. Careful, Tom, this thing's heavy as sin."

"I think we can manage it perfectly if we can just negotiate this corner by the door. The point is to hold it as level as possible, of course."

"Look out for the steps down to the chapel," said Kit Baird. "Tilt your end up a bit, boys, as we step down—about six inches, at a guess. That's the idea; now, steady does it. . . ."

Chatty ventured a terrified glance in the direction of the fading voices, and then unclinched her hands with a long, sobbing sigh of relief. Eight little scarlet crescents stood out sharply on the limp palms, showing the frantic urgency of that pressure. Hanna asked, without turning her head: "Have they—gone?"

"Yes, they've gone. . . . Oh, Lindy, I can't—I can't stop crying. I don't think that I'll ever be able to stop crying again, not ever, as long as I live."

Lindy, laying a consoling cheek against the poor wet hand, whispered: "Chatty, don't cry, don't cry. It will help us all a lot if you don't cry, truly. You see, we've all got to be brave, or none of us will be able to bear it."

A small, clear voice said from the threshold:

"Can I come in? It's me, Ray; they said you wanted me."

Lindy turned toward her swiftly. "Oh, Ray, what a good child you are! Of course we want you, and of course you can come in. See, there's nothing to be frightened of now—nothing at all."

Ray said simply, "I'm not frightened—not now that the wind's gone. . . . What's happened to the sofa?"

Lindy, scrutinizing the little face, wan and peaceful as a tired child's under its tear stains, asked gently, "Ray, haven't they told you what has happened?"

"You mean that someone murdered Doug King?

Oh, yes—they told me that. Was that why they were moving the sofa?"

"Yes. He was murdered on the sofa. Where are the others?"

Ray, standing with hands linked before her, docile and passive as a small schoolgirl, cast a speculative eye toward the hall. "I expect they're looking for the knife. Joel went into a perfect passion because Trudi said that of course some of the people downstairs would probably say that I'd had plenty of time to hide anything while I was up there, and he said that she shouldn't set her foot out of the room until she'd examined every square inch of it, and Trudi said not to be such an absolutely awful jackass, and my head started to ache again, so I came downstairs——"

Lindy asked incredulously:

"You mean they're actually searching your room for a knife? Oh, good heavens, has everyone gone absolutely out of their minds? . . . Trudi! Trudi!"

"What do you want?"

"I want you and Joel to come down here. We're all waiting for you."

"Well, we'll be down in a minute. Joel's mixing me some aromatic spirits of ammonia—anyone down there want any?" Trudi's voice was hoarse with exhaustion, but it came as steadily as ever.

"No, no—just hurry, will you?"

The rueful incredulity still edged Lindy's lips and twisted her brows as she turned to the men coming slowly back through the narrow door.

Gavin Dart glanced up from a fastidious inspection of something on his cuff, caught the look, and went beyond it to the now scattered group.

"Where are the others?"

"Oh, Gavin, according to poor little Ray they're tearing her room to pieces looking for a knife. I do—I do wish that you or someone else would go up there and stop them."

"He can spare himself the trouble," remarked Trudi from the hallway. "We've stopped ourselves. We've been sitting up there on the edge of the bed taking turns holding our heads and administering rounds of ammonia." She surveyed the faces before her with a certain amount of grimness. "I don't know anything about the etiquette of an occasion of this kind, but it doesn't strike me that a good rousing dose of it would do some of you any harm. How about it, Sherry?"

Sherry repelled the suggestion with a vigorous contortion of his now clay-coloured countenance.

"Good God, no! Thanks just the same, though, of course. Lindy, do you think that it would be—oh, you know—disrespectful or—or callous or anything if I mixed up a drink? I'm damn near all in, and it doesn't make much difference to me who knows it."

Lindy, the shadowed ghost of a smile touching her lips, murmured: "It doesn't seem to me such a very dreadful thing to do. . . . Wait, and I'll get more ice. Someone will have to come with me, won't they? You, Trudi?"

But Sherry was waiting for no ice. He drank in great gulps, the glass clicking against his teeth, and he put it down as though he were loath to relinquish it even for a moment.

"Lord, I've been craving that! Only I didn't want to do anything that didn't look exactly respectful. . . . I'm shot to pieces, and that's the truth. He was the best pal I ever expect to have."

Gavin Dart, inspecting the two inches that he had

poured in the bottom of his glass with scrupulous accuracy, glanced up swiftly.

"I hadn't realized that—tough luck! I don't believe that we're going to need the ice, Lindy. Fix you up one, Larry?"

"Thanks—there isn't enough whiskey in the world to do me any good." He pushed the bottle from him, and turned a grimly interrogatory face to the assembled company. "Well, where are we now?"

Gavin Dart replied thoughtfully, "Just precisely where we were, as far as I personally am concerned. Still completely, totally, and absolutely in the dark."

Kit inquired equably, "Has anyone any particular objection to making at least a gesture toward the light? No? Then I have two or three suggestions, to which you're all naturally at liberty to give short shrift. The first is that we turn out these abominable lights, sit down quietly, and try to forget for a few moments that the Furies are at our backs."

"My God," said Trudi wearily, collapsing into the nearest chair with complete and unqualified abandon. "I was just beginning to think that anyone with a grain of sense in their make-ups must have died ten years before I was born. Kit, I'm your slave from now on! What's the next move?"

"The next move," said the red-headed young man, kneeling purposefully on the hearth, "is that I make a fire, and that the rest of you pull up around it. I've noticed before this that the mind and the marrow are prone to become chilled at one and the same time. Suppose we start with thawing out the marrow! There are a lot of pillows about. You take the trivet, Ray, and here's a chair waiting for Jill that's almost in the cinders."

"Not near the fire," said the dreadful, polite little voice. "I'd rather not come near the fire."

"Jill," said the red-headed young man in a voice that would have once again lured the children from Hamelin, "there's nothing near the fire but a lot of poor devils who love you and want to help you. Give us a chance, won't you? Here's Larry, and Lindy, and that chair all waiting. You aren't going to keep us waiting?"

She rose, slowly and mechanically, the eyes of a sleep-walker fixed on her goal, while the halting feet followed the compelling charm of that voice as though it were a cord stretched for her to walk across the abyss of madness itself. Past the winged chair, past the satinwood table, past the little flower-sprigged tabouret, past the dreadful gap that had been the sofa—she caught frantically at the outstretched hand, and felt it draw her, strongly and swiftly, to safety, and the shelter of Larry's arms and Lindy's eyes.

"And that makes all of us," said Kit. "Here's a stool for your slippers, Jill, and a pillow for your curls. Lindy, if you'll start that coffee pot again, I can guarantee you at least one client—no, two, because Jill's going to have one with me. . . . Well, that brings us down to my last suggestion, doesn't it? Rather the most important of the lot, so you'd better get rather more alert and agog before you either accept or decline it. Just suppose we try looking this thing in the face, instead of crawling all around it. . . . Within the last half hour a murder has been committed in this room. Naturally, each and every one of us is under suspicion. And equally naturally, the ordinary procedure would be to get in touch with the police, in order to establish the other fellow's guilt and our own innocence. But as that happens to be impossible, it seems fairly essential to get at whatever

facts are available in as decent and orderly fashion as possible—essential, that is, if some of us aren't to wind up in a madhouse.... Dart, you profess to have a fairly extensive knowledge of police methods and the majestic process of the law, don't you?"

"It's been my chief interest for some years—yes."

"Then my final suggestion is that for the time being you represent the forces of law and order, and that we all agree to abide by your decision as to the best way to get at the discovery of the guilty one amongst us.... Naturally this suggestion isn't going to be particularly popular with one of us, but it should be enthusiastically received by the other eleven, unless an accomplice is involved. Suppose we put it to a vote?"

"Oh, come, that's hardly necessary, is it?" asked Tom Ross, his haggard face relaxing to something like a smile. "You're actually serving notice on us, Kit, that a negative vote is tantamount to a confession, aren't you? It seems to me that common prudence suggests that we elect Dart by acclaim! Well, as far as the Ross family is concerned he may consider himself elected."

"Do I hear any dissenting voices?" inquired the red-headed young man blandly. "Not a discordant note, apparently! Dart, from now on you may consider yourself law, order, science, public opinion, judge, jury, and everything but executioner. I doubt whether so much authority was ever vested in one man before!... We're all at your service."

Gavin Dart said quietly, "Thanks, I'm entertaining no flattering illusions as to my status; I'm in exactly the same boat as the rest of you, naturally. But I'll accept your proposition for one very excellent reason." He leaned forward, the firelight carving grim shadows along the lean cheeks and lighting dark fires of proph-

ecy in the narrowed eyes. "There have been very few important trials here, in England, or on the continent that I haven't followed in the last twenty years. . . . I know precisely what it means to be involved in one—I know precisely what it means to be caught in the path of great machinery of the press and the law that in these days constitutes a murder trial. It makes no difference whatever how innocent of the crime itself you may be; if you stand in the path of juggernaut, you're doomed. . . . If we can't hand over the murderer of Douglas King to the police before they take this case in hand—if this case comes to trial without a confession—every last one of us here will be on trial for our lives as much as the prisoner at the bar."

Lindy, her dark eyes darker, said softly, "Gavin, I'm very stupid, but I simply don't understand. How can a person who is perfectly innocent be subjected to that? How is it possible?"

"It's not possible. It's certain. Have you ever followed a trial, Lindy? Have you seen what happens to the witness on the stand? We will be witnesses, every last one of us—material witnesses: and I'll be willing to wager that precious few of us who crawl out from under the wheels will find much sweetness or savour left in life."

Kit eyed him with neatly tempered irony.

"Surely you're not suggesting that even the blameless and the stainless will find the witness chair a seat of judgment? Some of us must have lives that are an open book for any runner to read!"

"Whose life, Baird?" There was steel in the voice that turned back the light shafts of irony. "Yours? Mine? Hardy's wife? Larry's sweetheart? Find me the book that has in it no pages better left unread, no pages too

sacred or too terrible for the breakfast-table consumption of tens of millions in letters three inches high. . . . 'Club Man Under Cross-examination Admits Youthful Escapade Ending in Expulsion from College.' 'Young Society Matron Under Merciless Grilling Confesses Unrequited Love for Murdered Man' . . . I tell you that simply you don't know what you're in for; I do."

"You seem a bit down on the law and the press," commented Kit drily.

"Oh, I'm holding no brief for or against them. I'm telling you that the very essence of cross-examination is to disgrace and discredit the poor wretch on the stand, in order to make the damaging testimony wrested from him by due process of law seem false, worthless, and, if possible, perjured. Twelve men and the world are listening to it; the job of the cross-examiner is to make twelve men and the world believe they're listening to a horse thief and a wife beater who certainly wouldn't be averse to such a minor peccadillo as taking a false oath on a Bible."

Kit drawled, "You make it sound highly unattractive. All right, suppose we all endeavour to keep off the witness stand! I'll promise to answer any and all of your questions promptly enough to please even the police, but of course I take it for granted that you hardly expect that even the most self-sacrificing of us is going to tie a noose around his neck in order to keep his friends and relatives away from the horrid rigours of cross-examination? I imagine that you'll have to take our answers with a little more than the proverbial grain of salt. I doubt whether even you will be able to convince us that confession is good for the soul at this stage of the game."

"Thanks," said Gavin Dart. "Neither optimism nor

credulity is listed particularly high in my list of virtues—I'll not expect more candour than you'd show the police. I'll content myself with stating that all things being equal, it will simplify things immensely if you'll all try to tell the truth."

"Then we're off," said the red-headed young man. "How would our enemies, the police, start in?"

"In all probability, after the good old classic formula—the one that was invented by Cain's pursuers, I imagine." He smiled, but the tired eyes were grave. "They'd undoubtedly endeavour to equip at least one of us with the eternal triangle of the means, the motive, and the opportunity. If that attempt proved too idealistic, they'd make for the essential clue. Failing even that, they'd cast a regretful eye on the Spanish inquisition and get down to brass tacks. . . . Suppose we follow in their steps, and aim first for the ideal . . . The means."

He paused, scrutinizing the lifted circle of faces with a look that was suddenly terrifyingly impersonal.

"Doug King was murdered with a knife. That knife must be somewhere in this house; it is entirely within the realms of possibility that it is in this room. It's hardly likely, you see, that the murderer had time to conceal it very far afield; every second that passed with it in his possession was perilous to him, naturally, and I imagine that he must have disposed of it at the very first opportunity. . . . Trudi, how long a time should you say elapsed between the last gong and Jill's scream?"

Trudi knit her brows, and beneath them the cool eyes travelled back farther . . . farther still . . . back to that shattered moment of incredulous horror.

"Three minutes—four, perhaps. I couldn't swear."

"You agree with that, Tom?"

"Approximately. It certainly wasn't less than three."

"Any other estimates? Between three and four minutes, then. Now after the scream, how long should you say before the lights went on, Larry?"

"Good Lord, I don't know—about a minute and a half?"

"Oh, not so long! Not more than a minute, surely," said Lindy, her lip caught in her teeth in the effort to summon memory back from that dark nightmare of confusion.

"Did it seem longer than a minute or so to anyone here?"

Hanna, stirring again from that deep dream of hers, said without turning her head: "It seemed longer than that to me. It seemed . . . forever."

Gavin asked quietly, "Did it strike anyone else as over two minutes, let us say?"

"I doubt whether it could possibly have been as much as that," Kit remarked casually. "I happened to glance down at my wrist watch a second or so after the lights went on. It was exactly ten past twelve."

Gavin glanced swiftly in the direction of the careless voice and even more swiftly back to the interrupted study of his cuff.

"Now that's decidedly helpful, Baird. Well, let's see how our calculations work out. Say that we allow two minutes after the clock struck twelve to get to the upper landing and strike the gong; three minutes between the strokes of the gong; four minutes between the starting gong and Jill's scream, and a minute or so between her scream and the time that the lights went on. That would make it about right, wouldn't it?"

"Just about," conceded Kit thoughtfully, "Just

about exactly right, if you ask me. . . . Or was it me that you were asking, Gavin?"

"You or anyone else, my dear fellow. It's thanks to you that we're able to check it so closely, of course. Then that means that the murderer had barely four minutes between the last gong and Jill's scream. He'd hardly have dared to go blundering about in the darkness in constant danger of discovery with the knife still in his possession, should you think? No. . . . We'll find it in the room, I imagine. By the way, how many of you have pocket knives?"

"Guilty," said Kit promptly. "Bloodstains and all—here, catch!"

He tossed it with an easy turn of the wrist, and Gavin Dart raised inquiring brows at the ugly red stain on the neat gold handle.

"Cutting off those violets of Lindy's," explained Kit obligingly. "There's some good damning circumstantial evidence for you! Does that let me in and everyone else out, Gavin?"

"Well, hardly. I may be wrong, of course, but this looks entirely too small and inadequate to have made such a ghastly thorough job of it. And of course I was witness to the violet episode. . . . Any others?"

Sherry unhooked a platinum object the length of his little finger and the thickness of a quarter from the end of a miraculous watch chain, and Tom Ross surrendered a more utilitarian object with a rough bone handle and a good competent girth. Dart flicked it open, and sat weighing it thoughtfully in his hand; the circle sat motionless, their eyes riveted on the immaculate expanse of shining blade. . . .

"Does that exhaust the knives? Well, we'll start in

on a systematic search of the premises after we get a bit further with our questions. Naturally, if a knife doesn't materialize, we'll all be subject to a fairly rigorous search before we're permitted to leave the room." The circle of eyes met his, inscrutable and unflinching; if the thought of a rigorous search was a menacing one, the eyes at least were not traitors. "That's agreed, then. By the way, Lindy, were there any other knives available around here?"

"There are several in the kitchen, of course, and some in that lacquer cabinet in the corner. Oh, and the one that Doug—" Her voice stumbled a little over the name and resumed valiantly—"that Doug was whittling the stick with.... Were there any left in the pantry, Trudi?"

"Not as far as I know. Chatty and I put 'em all back in the cabinet."

Kit, his eyes suddenly intent, demanded:

"Here, how about that knife of Doug's? It was on the card table over there when I went upstairs. Anyone notice it since the lights came on?"

There was a swift, negative murmur, and he swung to his feet, crossing the room to the far corner where the table stood, pushed back against the wall.

"It's gone," he said. For a moment he stood staring down at the table, with its gay, untidy trail of scattered cards, cigarette stubs, ash trays and half-empty glasses. Then he asked, not turning his head:

"Anyone put it away after the game?"

The silence answered for them. No one had put it away after the game.

Out of the silence Joel volunteered, "Well, it was there when you went upstairs, all right! You threw it right back on the table just after you told us how

sharp it was—remember? Maybe it's under some of the cards."

"No—it's not under the cards. It's gone. . . . Well, I imagine that gives you your knife, Gavin. Do we hunt it down now or wait till later?"

"Till later, I think. It won't acquire wings in the interim. Let's move up to our next problem . . . the opportunity. Suppose we simply take everyone's name in order, and find out where they were at the time that Jill screamed, a minute or so before the lights went on. You first, Trudi."

"I was up in one of the bedrooms near the head of the stairs, the second one to the right, I think, but it was pitch black, and I lost count of the doors. I think it was Chatty's room."

"How about you, Joel?"

"Somewhere at the far end of the south corridor on the second floor; there's a whole warren of little trunk rooms and things down there—I haven't the foggiest idea which one I was in. I heard a lot of voices and people running, and came on out to see what was up."

"You, Lindy?"

"I was almost in the room—just outside, in the hall." The dark eyes moved slowly from the threshold to the little clear space that had held the sofa, measuring the dreadful briefness of that distance. Something deep in them shuddered, and was still.

"You were quite near the lights, then; was it you who turned them on?"

"No. . . . It sounds absurd, I know, but I couldn't move. I couldn't move an inch. You say that you didn't hear her scream, Gavin; it was rather a—rather a dreadful sound. And I was quite close to it. . . . I don't know who turned on the lights."

"I did," said Kit Baird.

"You were in the room, too?"

"No. I was clear across the hall, in the little writing room beyond the library. I came straight on in as soon as I heard the scream, though. It took me a few seconds to locate the lights, but I'm inclined to agree with Lindy that it wasn't anything like a minute and a half before the lights went on. Well under a minute, I should say."

"I see. Where were you, Tom?"

"I was in the chapel."

"In the chapel? Did you go through this room to reach it?"

"No. I'd gone down the service stairs and come through the door from the back corridor. I was planning to come through this room and try the hall closets when I heard the scream. It took me a few seconds to find the door; the lights went on just as I was reaching for them."

"Thanks. Now, Hanna, how about you?"

The great eyes travelled slowly to meet his. "I was just outside the door of Lindy's room."

"How were you able to identify it as Lindy's room?"

"It's the far one to the left of the stairs, Gavin. The little one that they call the Priest's Room—the little one with the pine panelling."

"But how could you know it so positively in the dark?"

"I'd just come out of it—I could feel the panelling under my hand."

She moved the long, beautiful hands slowly, cautiously, as though once more she felt the panelling beneath them.

"And you heard Jill scream?"

"How could anyone not have heard her scream?"

"I, for one, didn't hear her," said Gavin Dart quietly.

Hanna, her grave eyes on his, once more moved the bright splendour of her head as though there rested on it an intolerable weight. She said slowly, "I heard her scream very, very clearly."

"How about you, Sheridan?"

"I'll be damned if I can tell you what I heard," said Sherry wearily, lifting his head from his hands. "A whole lot of running and shouting and yelling—I was 'way up in the attic, and I thought someone must have fallen downstairs or something, so I came piling on down—and about a second after I got to the door the lights went on and I saw——" He broke off, glared frantically about him, and plunged back into the sheltering support of his hands.

"Are there stairs from the third floor to the attic?"

"No; there's sort of a ladder thing, flat against the wall, that goes up to a trapdoor."

"All right, Chatty, you next."

"I was just coming back down the north corridor, Gavin. I didn't know who it was that screamed, but I was terribly frightened and I tried to call out for Tom—but before I could even move someone came running by me toward the stairs . . . they nearly knocked me over, and they didn't stop at all——"

"They—there were more than one of them?"

"No, no, there was only one of them, but I didn't know whether it was a he or a she, so that's why I said 'they'," explained Chatty, her voice trembling in spite of her most valiant efforts. She added despairingly, "Oh, Gavin, I never, never can get pronouns straight, not even where it's so horribly important, but there was only one of them, I do know that . . . and they didn't stop even when they almost knocked me over."

"Someone in the north corridor. Was your room in the north corridor, Ray?"

"No; it's down a little jog near the stairs, just before you turn down the south corridor. I didn't hear anything because I was in bed, and I had all the covers over my ears, and I was crying," explained Ray, the dreadful and touching dignity of a child wounded to the quick making the small stern face smaller and sterner. "I was crying because Joel had been very, very rude to me indeed; and that is all that I am going to tell you about it, Gavin, and if that makes you think that it was I that killed Doug King, you will just have to think so, and so will the judge and the lawyers. Because they can't make me talk about things that I don't care to talk about, no matter how much they send me to jail."

Gavin said, a smile lighting the fine dark eyes, "My dear, I don't believe that even a judge would send you to jail, and it's quite unnecessary to go into details about Joel's outrageous conduct. He looks to me as though he thoroughly regretted it."

Joel said in a voice that was ten years younger than his bride's: "Ray, I think that you're the hardest, most unfeeling girl that I ever met in my whole life. I practically went on my knees to you up there, asking you to forgive me for getting you into this ghastly mess and you wouldn't even listen. All you want to do is to make me feel like the original Gadarene swine——"

"Being blasphemous isn't going to help you any, Joel Hardy," commented Ray coldly. "No one in this world has any right to call anyone else a cry baby and a c-coward and a whole lot of other simply disgusting things and then to——" The dignified voice broke in a small squeak of misery, and Joel, reckless of his riveted audience, swept the rigid occupant of the trivet into his arms,

where she promptly dissolved into an excellent imitation of Niobe.

"Don't cry, my blessed baby, don't, don't—I can't bear it when you cry! I'm the vilest brute that ever lived to make you unhappy even for a minute."

"Are we engaged in trying to find out who murdered Doug King or in chaperoning Ray and Joel through their first quarrel?" inquired Trudi grimly. "Personally, I don't quite seem able to give their troubles my undivided attention."

"Oh, Trudi," said Lindy, her eyes touching the shorn brown head buried in Joel's shoulder with a very lovely gentleness, "Ray's luckier than we are . . . she didn't see —Doug. I don't believe that it seems very real to her. . . . I think that we ought to be awfully glad that it doesn't seem real to her."

"Well, it seems real to me," said Trudi briefly, "and I should think it might seem fairly real to Joel, too. I don't want to interrupt the course of true love, but if everything's all jake with the young Hardys, I feel more in the mood for an inquest. Where do we go from here, Gavin?"

"We go back," said Gavin Dart. The smile had faded in his eyes. "To the north corridor, where someone ran past Chatty Ross. I believe that everyone's accounted for but you, Larry. Was it you?"

"Certainly not; I wasn't anywhere near it. As a matter of fact, I was going through the linen presses down at the opposite end of the house. The door had banged to behind me and I came out just in time to hear Joel shouting, and I went on past him down the stairs into the hall. Chatty was downstairs by then, of course; I had to push past the lot of them to get in to Jill."

"Then according to all of your accounts, no one but Chatty was in that corridor," said Gavin Dart slowly. "And according to Chatty, one of you is lying. . . . Well, for the time being, that's that. Everyone accounted for at the time of the scream, aren't they?"

"Everyone but you," remarked Kit amiably. "Or are you exempt from accounting, Gavin?"

Gavin, meeting the lazy irony of those pensive eyes with a somewhat deeper irony, said quietly:

"Not precisely. I thought that I'd explained when I first came in that I was out in back exploring the service quarters. As a matter of fact, I was just coming up the cellar stairs when I heard someone call, and came straight back through the service quarters to this room. I must have been down below when Jill screamed, as I didn't hear a sound until I heard my name."

"Down in the cellar, you mean?"

"No, no; the cellar door was locked. I worked over it for a minute or so thinking that it might be stuck, and then started up for the kitchen. That's when I first heard whoever it was that called."

"All very tidy and circumstantial," conceded Kit blandly. "And as you were saying when I so rudely interrupted, we're all accounted for at the time of the scream, with the slight reservation that at least one of us is lying. . . . What's next, Your Honour?"

"Well, next, I'd like to get the entrances to this room straight, if you don't mind. Let's see—there are these double doors from the main hall, and this one to the right of the fireplace from the chapel, and the one to the left of it from the service quarters. Oh, and those French windows opening on the terrace, of course. That's all?"

"That's all."

"Good. Now about the stairways. There's the main one that runs up to the third floor, and the service stairs from the kitchen that Tom and I used—no other service flights, Lindy?"

"No; the servants' quarters are all in that wing."

"Then with the ladder to the attic all the means of getting up and down stairs are accounted for, aren't they?"

"No," said Lindy. She moved a little, so that the firelight fell more brightly on her upturned face, and once more the air was fresh with violets. "There's another staircase, Gavin."

"Another staircase?" The amazement in his voice was only a faint reflection of the startled faces in the circle. "Another staircase? Where?"

"Another staircase running from the back of the closet in the Priest's Room to the space behind the altar in the chapel. It goes down between the walls."

"You mean a secret staircase?"

"No, no, not really secret. It was just a way for the priest to go back and forth to the chapel without disturbing the rest of the household. I mean there aren't any sliding panels or anything mysterious like that about it; the door at the back of the closet has a handle on it, and the one behind the altar has a little thumb latch, though I don't believe that you would notice it if you weren't looking for it."

"Everyone but myself is perfectly familiar with it, then?"

"Oh, no, indeed; I've never told a soul about it." She gave him once more that lovely, rueful smile, at once an apology and a defence for past folly. "You see,

being the most arrantly romantic of all romantic little idiots, I did try to pretend to myself that it was a secret staircase, and a staircase that you tell everyone about isn't exactly secret, is it? Aunt Serena showed it to me when I was seven years old, and we piled a lot of old boxes and bags at the back of the closet to hide the door handle, and I've kept the secret ever since. . . . I always thought it would be a simply wonderful place for Hide in the Dark, but I was so afraid that someone might see me coming out, and that that would give it away that I never used it. . . . It's such a lovely little staircase; I'm sorry that it isn't a secret any more."

Chatty cried excitedly, "Oh, but, Lindy, don't you think that maybe Doug knew about it? Don't you remember how he was prowling around out there trying to see if there wasn't some way that Kit could have gotten in while you were doing the mirror trick . . ."

The words trailed away under the sudden penetrating attention of Gavin Dart's eyes.

Kit Baird, smiling a little at the pallid confusion of the guileless countenance, said imperturbably:

"I doubt very much whether Doug King knew anything about the stairway. It happens that I did, however, and it's perfectly true that I used it to get to Lindy while she was doing the mirror trick. The raincoat story was a base subterfuge."

Chatty demanded blankly:

"Well, but, Kit, why in the world did you want to frighten poor Lindy so that you made her drop the mirror and spoil the game? I should think——"

"Oh, you shouldn't, you shouldn't," urged Kit, mockery dancing once more in his eyes, "or you might possibly stumble on the theory that it was essential for me to join Lindy even at the risk of frightening her

into dropping the mirror because I, too, am the most arrantly romantic of all idiots."

Chatty stammered incredulously:

"Oh, but, Kit, you aren't romantic at all. About Lindy, I mean. I mean——"

The red-headed young man did not cast so much as a glance on the rosy confusion of the hapless Chatty. Still smiling, hands linked behind his head, eyes on something beyond the darkness, he said softly:

"Go to the foot of the class, least observant of all Eve's daughters! You're wrong again. . . . I am quite, quite romantic about Lindy. . . ."

Lindy, a handbreadth from him, did not stir. Only her eyes moved—not toward him, but toward that place beyond the darkness that his had found, as though they had a tryst.

It was Gavin Dart who broke the long silence: "How did you come to know about these stairs, Baird?"

Jill spoke suddenly and clearly from the depths of her cushions: "Sunny told you, didn't she, Kit?"

He said, not turning his head:

"Yes; Sunny. I caught her trying to work the catch from the chapel side that last time we were out here, and she let me in on the secret. She was going to try hiding there the next time that she played Hide in the Dark. . . . She never played it again."

"We both found it that last afternoon," said Jill. "It was the closet in our room, you know, and Sunny was trying to get a hat from the shelf and tipped over the boxes——"

She was abruptly silent, and Gavin asked:

"There were at least three of you who were aware of these stairs then: Lindy, Kit, and Jill. Were there any more?"

Lindy asked wonderingly: "But, Gavin, are the stairs so important? I'm probably being stupid again, but truly, I can't see why!"

"Lindy, I may be wrong, but it seems to me that the stairs may be of the very greatest importance. Suppose, to take a purely hypothetical case, that one of us had discovered them by accident, and thought that everyone else in the house was totally unaware of their existence? Here would have been an absolutely unknown method of approaching this room—or of escaping from it—that would be under cover the greater part of the way. A really superb place to hide any incriminating evidence, as even the most zealous investigator can't very well search something that he doesn't know exists! A place that a knife, for instance, might be concealed in for days——" He broke off, rising abruptly to his feet. "Suppose we call a halt for a few minutes while we investigate these famous stairs. Is there a flash light anywhere round here?"

"There's one in the corner of the lacquer cabinet," said Trudi. "We were using it out in the kitchen, and I put it with the silver and things."

Gavin took a step in the direction of the cabinet, and Hanna flung out a detaining hand.

"Gavin, wait." He turned, something in the low voice swinging him about in his tracks. "Gavin, you said that you wouldn't leave me again. You promised."

He said slowly:

"And so I did. . . . You don't want me to go? Well, that's perfectly simple, then. I'll deputize someone else. There are one or two things that I still want to straighten out anyway, and I'll probably be more useful here than anywhere else. . . . Kit, you know the way, don't you? Suppose that you and Tom take that flash

light, and make a good thorough search of the whole thing. Bring back anything that you find, of course—only remember the importance of finger marks, and go a bit easy on the way you handle things."

Kit swung to his feet, slinging a carelessly protective arm about Tom Ross's narrower shoulders.

"Oh, rely on us!" he assured Gavin with a sudden gleam of teeth. "You shall have every knife we find absolutely untampered with; shan't he, Tom? And of course if it's that nice bone-handled one that Doug was fooling around with after the poker game, it ought to have a really first-rate set of finger prints of mine to warm the heart of headquarters—or has headquarters got a heart?"

"Finger prints of yours? What on earth are you talking about?"

"He means he picked the knife up to look at it after Doug put it down," interposed Joel promptly and heatedly. "You saw him do it yourself; what in the devil do you think he meant?"

Kit flung a brief smile over his shoulder in the direction of the indignant countenance of his champion.

"I'll leave my interests in your hands, old boy; you're obviously more capable of looking out for them than I am. The quickest way's through the chapel, Tom—watch out for that step."

Gavin, following the red head and the brown one with inscrutable eyes, let a full minute go by without a word. Then, turning back to his place on the love-seat, he asked, leisurely sympathetic, "Feel up to answering two or three questions now, Jill?"

"I'll—try."

The piteous eyes in the small, strained face turned slowly to him.

"You found Doug's hiding place very quickly, didn't you?"

"Yes." She wrung her hands together until the knuckles were bone white, but her voice did not waver.

"Was that simply chance, or had you any reason to believe that you might find him there?"

"I had every reason. He told me that he was going to be there."

"He told you that? When?"

"Just after—just after we put the lights out . . . before we started upstairs."

"You were in the dark when he told you this?"

"Yes. In the dark."

"Could anyone have overheard you?"

"I don't know. We were talking quite softly, in whispers. He'd followed me over to the window; I thought that all the others were near the fire. They were trying to put it out, I think."

"But someone might have followed him in the darkness, of course. Can you remember just what he said to you, Jill?"

"Yes. He said that he wanted to try a scheme that he and Sunny and I had talked over at the last party that we had here. He'd been reading the Purloined Letter—you remember how the thief left it lying right under the nose of the searchers, and no one ever found it because it was so obvious; he was sure that it would work perfectly in Hide in the Dark. . . . He chose the sofa because that was where he was supposed to wait until the signal to hide, and he was sure that no one would dream that he'd just go on sitting there."

"And he asked you to join him?"

"No; he simply asked me to be very careful not to give him away. It was I who suggested it. I—I wanted

to ask him a question; I'd been trying all evening to get a word with him."

"What question?"

She stared back at him despairingly, the colour draining back from the delicate hollows in her cheeks.

"I can't tell you. It's no good asking me, I can't. It wasn't about me . . . it was about other people. I'll tell you anything else, but I can't tell you that."

Gavin Dart looked gravely and compassionately at the hard-wrung hands.

"Jill, I have no power on earth to force you to tell us anything whatever, but I can give you my word that in the end it will be far, far easier for you if you tell us now what that question was."

"I wasn't thinking of what would be easier for me," said Jill Leighton. "I can't tell you what it was, either now or later."

"Very well. Will you tell us, then, just what you did, from the time that the last gong struck until you screamed?"

"Yes. I waited to let the others get a good start and then went straight down to the Priest's Room on the second floor. I thought that I'd use those stairs to get to the chapel and then to this room—that I'd be less likely to run into anyone that way. But there was someone in the Priest's Room, so I came back by the front stairs. I could hear someone moving around in this room—footsteps, and a little crash of some kind, so I stood back against the stairs, waiting. Two people passed quite close to me, one going upstairs and the other crossing into the library, and then everything seemed quite still in the room, so I went in. . . . I came straight over . . . straight over to the sofa, and sat down on the end nearest the door. I waited a second or so and then I whis-

pered, 'Are you there, Doug?' No one answered, and I put out my hand, and touched his sleeve. I said, 'Doug, it's Jill!' and when he still didn't say anything, I thought that he must have fallen asleep, and I put out my other hand to give him a little shake. And then I felt—then I felt——" She turned a face that was suddenly deathly sick against the cushion of the chair, her voice trailing off into something fainter than a whisper. "Then I felt that my hands were . . . wet. . . ."

"Gavin, don't ask her anything more now." Lindy's voice was stirred from its cool tranquillity to something startlingly like indignation. "It's sheer mediæval torture to make her go over that part of it. Jill, darling, it's all over; you don't have to tell us any more at all, darling . . . not ever."

Jill said, "There's nothing more to tell. That's all . . . I'm all right, Lindy; don't bother about me, dear."

"I bother about you rather a lot," murmured Lindy, a soft passion of indignation still shaking her voice. "Chatty, hand me up that other cushion for her, there's a good child—no, the one near Joel's foot."

Chatty reached for it obediently, and then pushed it from her with a small sound of amazement, leaning forward to inspect it more closely.

"But, Lindy, it's simply sopping! How on earth—oh, Joel, look out! It's your feet; they're absolutely wringing wet—look, almost up to your knees! Where in heaven's name have you been? . . . Wait—here's one of mine, Lindy."

Gavin, inspecting the tip of his own immaculately polished shoe with grave interest, inquired sympathetically:

"So you got your feet wet, Joel? Hard luck. But you can't expect to keep dry shod on a night like this."

Joel gave the cuff of his trouser a vicious wring and turned an indignant eye on his suave interrogator.

"How do you mean, on a night like this? The weather to-night hasn't got anything more to do with me than it has with you."

"Oh, my mistake; it looked for a moment as though you'd been battling with the elements."

"Well, I haven't." Joel's glare was entirely unmollified, and his grip tightened on the thin little paw of the young thing seated beside him and staring at Gavin Dart with the disconcerting intensity of a very small, slightly ruffled owl, round-eyed and solemn. "I haven't set my foot outside of this house since supper. What do you think I am, anyway—cuckoo?"

Gavin, passing over this impassioned and rhetorical question with an agreeable smile, asked mildly: "Was the sewing room fairly damp?"

"Quite a little wag, aren't you?" inquired Joel bitterly. "No, Scotland Yard, the sewing room was not fairly damp. I got my feet wet crashing into that damned tub of apples over there, if that's what you want to know."

Gavin followed the spacious gesture toward the corner with eyes luminous with interest.

"Did you, now! And just how did you come to crash into it?"

"Well, it was black as a nigger's pocket, and I was feeling my way along the wall, trying to get back to the door. I ran bang into the rotten thing; it came slopping out all over my ankles like a tidal wave . . . I got as nasty a crack in the shin as I've had in a couple of cycles, too, if that's of any interest to you."

"Of the greatest interest, I assure you. You mean that all this happened on your way upstairs, just after

the lights went out, and before the first gong sounded?"

"Now don't you wish I'd say yes to that?" demanded Joel with more than a trace of belligerence. "Oh, I'm not as dumb as I look—I heard you asking Jill if someone couldn't have eavesdropped on her when she was making a rendezvous with Doug right about in that corner. . . . No, sir, it was not before the first gong rang. It was after the second gong rang."

"You hadn't confided in us that you were in this room at approximately the time of the murder, had you?"

"You're darn shouting I hadn't. And as far as I'm concerned," added the rashly impenitent Joel, "it would have been all right with me if you hadn't ever found out that I was within a mile of it. Not after that crack of Larry's about even Cæsar's wife not being above suspicion! If involving me means involving Ray, you can bet your life that I'm going to fight like a wildcat every time I catch any of you trying to pin anything on me. I'm the lad that got her into this mess, and I'm the lad that's going to get her out."

"My dear fellow, there's not a man here that doesn't feel exactly as you do! I'd be the last person in the world to blame you for a moment for trying to keep free of incriminating evidence—our only difference would be as to the safest method to go about it. I'm sorry if my manner has been offensive; I don't want to put in a bid for sympathy, but I pledge you my word that I'm not at all in love with my present job. I have every intention of seeing it through, however, and you could help me quite a bit, if you felt like it."

"I've been talking through my hat," said Joel, with fervent simplicity. "All right, fire ahead . . . I feel like it."

"The time element in this thing interests me con-

siderably," explained Gavin Dart. "I want to narrow it down all I can. How long after the second gong sounded were you in this room?"

"Oh, about two minutes maybe. Look, it was like this. I was worried half crazy about Ray, and I wanted to get hold of her to tell her how sick I was about the way that I'd lit into her, but she was doing her best to keep out of my way . . . you were, weren't you, Ray?"

"I certainly was," said the little owl solemnly. "I certainly was."

"So the only idea that I had from the time that we started out was to track her down and explain to her how I felt about things, and see if I couldn't get her to see them my way. . . . Well, you'll probably get a good laugh out of the way that I started out, but I can't help that. All I knew was that I had to get hold of her, and I only knew one way to do it. She uses some funny kind of perfume—I could find it in the dark, all right, but I don't know what you call it. What in Hades do you call it, Ray?"

"It's Wallflowers. English Wallflowers."

"Well, whatever its name is, it's what I was after. . . . I started out after someone who brushed by me on the third-floor landing. I couldn't be sure that it was Ray, but I could tell that it was a girl, because her arm was bare. I lost her somewhere on the second floor, so I thought I'd have a shot at the first floor. I came crashing on down and struck out for this room; it was quieter than the tomb, and the only thing that I could smell was the wind—someone must have left a window open, or maybe it just came down the chimney—anyway, there weren't any more wallflowers around than you'd find in Iceland, and all of a sudden I got a rotten panicky feeling that I wanted to get out of this place. . . . I'd almost

gotten over to that door into the service quarters when I turned square around and started clawing my way back along the wall to get into the hall and up to the second floor again—I had a hunch that she was up there—Ray, I mean. I was going pretty until I crashed into this darn tub right at the corner——"

"Wait a bit, will you, Joel? Did you hear anything at any time that you were in this room, anything that seems at all suspicious, I mean, now that you look back on it?"

"Not a doggone thing. The only sound that I heard the whole enduring time was me lighting into that avalanche, and saying, 'Damn it to hell'—good and soft and emphatic. As soon as I got my breath back, I lit out again for the second floor—that's how I got back to that rat's nest of rooms that I was telling you about. . . ."

"This all helps a lot, of course. Now, just how close should you say that you passed to the sofa at any time during this performance—I mean either coming or going?"

"Well, look, I'll show you—that's the surest way." He was on his feet, all his eager interest at the service of his late adversary. "I came in, almost down the centre of the room—like this, see, and I was almost over to that service door when I changed my mind and went into reverse. I cut around here, just short of the cabinet, and came back along the wall, like this, past those windows and this other cabinet, and right here was where I came a cropper. I landed on the tub right at this angle—if I hadn't been the ass of the world, I'd have remembered that we'd shoved it off here to get it out of the way. Well, you can see yourself what happened, can't you? It caught me right above the ankle and I was as good as——" He broke off, staring down at the tub as

though he were suddenly and incredibly confronted with Medusa's head.

"By God, Gavin, there it is!"

"There what is?"

Something in his voice brought the contemplative inquisitor abruptly to his feet.

"The knife! Good-night, they must have just pitched it in without even—— Look, the water's all red——"

The door from the chapel opened with the quiet deliberation of fate itself, and Tom Ross and Kit Baird came through it more quietly still. Kit pushed it to behind him, and stood leaning against it, his hands deep in his pockets, a curiously arresting light in his eyes.

Gavin Dart, halfway between the fireplace and the transfixed Joel, turned to meet it.

"Hello, there—back already? And without a knife, I take it?"

"Without a knife." Kit drew a clenched hand slowly from his pocket, and stretched it out, opening the fingers with a curious reluctance. "We found something else, however, on a little landing halfway down the stairs from the Priest's Room. . . . It's an earring—a diamond earring. . . . Anyone here recognize it?"

Hanna Dart extended toward him one long white hand, the great eyes frozen to something far beyond fear fixed on the little, little glittering fountain sparkling in his palm.

"I recognize it," she said in a voice clear and strange as ice. "Will you give it to me, please? It is mine."

VI

"Just a moment, Kit." Gavin Dart laid a detaining hand on the outstretched wrist, staring down at the pretty trinket as though it were something inexpressibly ugly. "You say that this is yours, Hanna? I thought that you told us that you had put your earrings in the bedroom on your way upstairs?"

"That wasn't true, Gavin; I never put them there. The other one's here, tied in the end of my handkerchief."

She rose, unknotting the crumpled scrap of lace and lawn, and handed him the little glittering heap with steady fingers. It was through Gavin's that something like a tremor moved as he retrieved the one in Kit's hand, and dropped the pair of them on the table beside him, as though the touch of them soiled his fingers.

"And what, exactly, was your object in lying about these?" he inquired evenly of the tall girl standing before him, motionless as a statue of ivory and gold.

"Gavin, you mustn't try to frighten me, or I'll say stupid things. It's because I was frightened when I saw that the earring was gone that I made up that foolish story about leaving it on the dressing table."

"I see. And when did you notice that the earring was gone, if we are now in your confidence?"

"Just after the lights went on; just after I saw—Doug. . . . That mirror over there—it's right on a line, and I could see myself standing there . . . and one of the

earrings was gone. I put up my hands quickly, as though I were covering my face, and got the other one off, and twisted it up in the corner of my handkerchief. No one was looking at me. . . . No one was looking at anyone but—Doug."

Kit said quietly: "I was looking at you—in the mirror. It showed me exactly what it showed you, Hanna."

She asked gravely: "Did it, Kit? I didn't know that. Then that makes me a little duller than usual, doesn't it?"

"And will you tell us exactly why you decided to go through all this elaborate deception?" inquired Gavin Dart, bitterness suddenly shaking his pleasant voice.

"But, Gavin, I've told you why, haven't I? It was because I absolutely lost my head. I didn't want anyone to know that one of the earrings was missing; you see, I was afraid that I might have lost it on those stairs, and I meant to get away as quickly as possible so that I could look for it. . . . And then I couldn't get away."

"You were actually on those stairs, then?"

"Oh, yes—Gavin, don't you see, that's how the earring was there?"

He said harshly:

"Apparently I am more successful as an investigator than as a judge of character. I'd have staked my life on your candour and integrity—and yet in a moment's panic, you find it easier to lie than to breathe. . . . Well, I'm not enough of the stoic Roman to pursue this ghastly farce to a logical conclusion; I'll hand over the rôle of inquisitor to anyone that wants it. How about you, Larry?"

"I'll take a hand for a bit, if you don't mind," interposed Kit pleasantly. "There are two or three things

that I'm not quite clear about even now. Why not sit down, Hanna, and help us to straighten them out?"

She said: "I'd rather stand, please. What is it that you want to know?"

"Suppose we begin at the beginning. How did you know about these stairs?"

"I didn't know about them. I just—I just happened to find that door at the back of the closet."

Something young and wild and imploring appeared for a moment behind the clear serenity of the tall goddess's eyes, signalling to him frantically to turn back before it was too late—to have done with questions that led further into darkness.

Kit turned his head away, so that he would not see the desperate messenger.

"How did you happen to find it, Hanna?"

"I was following someone—someone that started down the stairs just ahead of me when the gong rang the second time."

"You knew who this person was?"

"I wasn't sure—only that it was a man. I knew that because there were only men in front of me and no one passed me."

"Why are you so sure of that?"

"Because I started the second that the gong rang, and I had my hands stretched out on either side of me, like this. . . . He went straight down to the second floor, and turned off into a room at the right. . . . I stood in the doorway for a minute, listening, waiting to find out what he was going to do next, and then I heard a queer little rustling sound at the other end of the room; I put my hand out and felt the panelling and knew that it was Lindy's room, and that the noise must be coming from her closet. . . . After a moment it

stopped, and there was a little creak, and then a click as though a door were closing; then everything was perfectly still. I thought—I thought that Doug was probably hiding in the closet, and that the other person must have found him there. . . . I got across the room somehow; the closet door was open—I couldn't understand that, because of the click, but I went on in anyway. There was a lot of tissue paper all over the floor and some boxes, too, but the closet was empty. I felt twice all around the walls to make sure, because I couldn't, I simply couldn't believe it, and the second time my hand touched the door knob. It wasn't fastened very tight; it turned under my hand, and I'd have fallen if I hadn't caught at the hand rail; that saved me. . . . I knew then that I was on some kind of a staircase. . . . I went on down a little way again—and then suddenly I realized that there was a landing, and I stopped to listen. I didn't know at all where the stairs came out, and it was terribly dark and still; I felt as though I should die of terror if I couldn't get out of that horrible, closed-in place. . . ." She put out her hands as though to push back even the memory of it, her eyes dilating strangely under the delicate brows. "I got back up the stairs somehow, and through the closet, and across to the door—I was just outside it in the hall, when I heard—I heard Jill scream. That was what I told you, Gavin—you know that I told you that, and it was absolutely true. The only thing that I said that wasn't true was about the earrings, and that was such a little thing. Are you still angry with me, Gavin?"

But before the man staring grimly down at the shining tokens of folly could do more than turn his tired face toward her, Kit cut in swiftly, his eyes on the tip of the cigarette between his fingers.

"Just one moment, Hanna. It was the dark that frightened you, you say? You're quite, quite sure that it wasn't a light?"

She stammered desperately, "A light? What light? What light do you mean?"

"You didn't turn back because someone at the foot of the stairs lit a cigarette lighter—a cigarette lighter like this?"

His hand shot out, and above the quick spurt of blue flame that shot with it, her eyes stared back at him, piteous and distraught.

"I don't know what you mean—I don't—I don't——"

"Oh, Hanna, I think you do." The cap descended on the flame with a little click that was rather terrible in its finality. "It was I whom you followed through the closet and down the stairway, you see; and it was I who lit this at the foot of the stairs, because I couldn't locate the thumb latch on the door to the chapel. It flickered and went out almost at once, because you'd left the closet door ajar, and there was a draught—but it stayed on long enough for you to see me, didn't it? And I think that you told us the truth when you said that you were frightened—while I stood there listening in the darkness, I heard your footsteps on the stairs, and you were running—you were running as though death itself were at your heels." He sat staring at the glowing tip of the cigarette for a moment in silence, ground it relentlessly against the mantel, and wheeled to face her. "Whom did you think that you were following down those stairs, Hanna? And why were you following him?"

"She thought she was following me," said Gavin Dart, rising from the corner of the love-seat where he was sit-

ting. "She was trying to follow me because she thought that I was going to murder Douglas King, and she wanted to stop me."

His voice cut through the appalled silence like a knife, and Hanna lifted a frantic hand to her heart, as though the knife had gone home. He went toward her, and the great room was suddenly empty of everything but their voices, reaching for each other across the darkness.

"I've been the damnedest of all damned fools. You knew, then? You knew what was actually happening on the *Starling?*"

She said, "Oh, my darling, I know how stupid and dull I must seem to you—but how could even I seem dull and stupid enough not to know that?"

He took her hands and laid them against his cheek, saying quietly, "Poor child—poor, poor child! And all these hours you've thought that it was I? You lied because you thought that it was I? And I was angry with you. . . . I was angry because I thought that you'd gone down those stairs to meet him." He released her hands, but his voice lingered. "You'll forgive me, but I'll not soon forgive myself. Sit here."

Sherry said wildly from his corner by the fire:

"Oh, I swear I think we're all headed for a madhouse! Why in God's name should you have wanted to murder poor old Doug?"

"Only on the ancient theory of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," replied Gavin Dart in the pleasant, courteous voice that he had somehow managed to retrieve from chaos. "You see, Sheridan, he made a rather unsuccessful attempt to murder me last winter. . . . Let me have a light from that famous lighter of yours, will you, Kit? I didn't realize that I had a nerve in my body—and look at that hand of mine now!"

"What do you mean, Doug King tried to kill you?" demanded Sherry, violently incredulous. "You took precious good care not to bring up any wild-eyed ballyhoo like that while he was here to tell you where to get off." His voice thickened suddenly, and his pleasant, dapper face twisted. "You try slandering a dead man to that precious jury of yours and see where you——"

"Oh, shut up, Sherry!" said Trudi listlessly. "Give your voice a rest, and pour Hanna a cup of that coffee. Jill has hers, hasn't she? This is yours, Lindy—one lump or two?"

"None, thanks—not just now, anyway. Gavin, are you going to tell us what you meant about Doug and you last winter? Was it something that happened on the *Starling?* Something while I was there?"

Gavin, one arm flung across the back of the love-seat behind Hanna's golden head, leaned his own head back, watching with steel-gray eyes the smoke-gray rings hover and break.

"On the *Starling*, yes—and when you were there. . . . You're quite right, Sherry, it would make a very poor story to tell to a jury. Any good lawyer could riddle it full of holes in less time than I'd take to tell it. It's true, nevertheless; and I think that perhaps as we've gone this far, we'd better go a bit further, and try it out now before a jury of my peers."

"Oh, rather!" concurred Kit Baird gently. "It looks as though we'd never have a better chance to try out that excellent policy of yours of open covenants openly arrived at. All the cards on the table—that's been our slogan from the first, hasn't it? Let's have a look at yours, Your Honour?"

Dart turned his eyes for a moment from his contem-

plation of the smoke rings to the blandly enigmatic countenance of the red-headed young man.

"Hoist by my own petard, eh? You're quite right; I'm a fairly reticent individual, and the prospect of retailing my most intimate affairs even to Hanna's most intimate friends leaves me somewhat chilled—especially as my own rôle from the beginning to the end is not precisely a heroic one. Still, I'll endeavour to console myself by setting the lot of you a shining example in candour! I'll start with the least palatable portion. Here goes. . . . I'm twenty-two years older than Hanna. I suppose that you all know that. But I doubt whether you know that I have been acutely, and detestably, and despicably jealous of her since the hour that I married her." Against the coral of the love-seat the fine aquiline face looked suddenly haggard and worn to the bone. "Let me say that no jealousy was ever less warranted. I have never had the remotest cause to doubt either her absolute loyalty to me, or her affection. Incredible as it still seems to me, I believe that she loves me."

Hanna the beautiful, Hanna the proud and still, said without turning her bright head: "Gavin, you know—you know that I love you."

He said, "Yes. I've not even that excuse to comfort me. I know that you love me. It's only the lover that you should have had, you see, that I am jealous of—the young lover that I see looking out at you from all those young eyes. . . . I make no apologies for myself. I consider such jealousy a shameful and degrading thing; I am doing some slight penance now in even owning to it. But I've paid for it, I assure you, a thousand times by eating my heart out day and night in these last ten years, and I have quite honestly done my level human best not to soil Hanna's love for me with it. That I

haven't entirely kept it from her is an unspeakable shame to me, and the fact that I haven't is the sole cause of her having put herself in this wretchedly ambiguous position to-night, with her poor little lies about earrings and hidden stairways. . . . You aren't a very good liar, Hanna!"

"Oh," she said humbly and sadly, "it didn't sound true to me even when I was saying it! It's all my fault. If it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have to be saying all those terrible things. Don't, don't say any more, please—not about being ashamed. Gavin . . . I know that it's dreadful of me, but I'm so proud that you're jealous of me."

"Are you, my beautiful girl? Then I'll try to be proud, too. . . . All right, that's done with, and we can get down to Doug King and the *Starling*. It wasn't until after we'd dropped the Hammonds off at Kingston and were on our way to Costa Rica that it began to dawn on me that for once the lunatic suspicions that were as common to me as my daily bread had some foundation. I'd asked King to come with us because I had understood from Hanna that he was interested in Lindy, and she wanted to do some matchmaking, as she was extremely fond of them both. We really got up the trip with that end in view. . . . But some time before we arrived in Port Limon it became fairly obvious that the wind was blowing from another quarter."

He dropped his cigarette into the jade cup at his elbow, and sat staring down at the twist of charred paper and ashes as though he wondered how it had come to be there . . . and the wind that blew from another quarter on those far-off seas seemed suddenly to fill the room, sinister and chilled.

"King wasn't paying the slightest attention to Lindy;

he was using every device and subterfuge known to a not particularly scrupulous Don Juan to maroon Hanna and himself on an imaginary desert island—after which Lindy and myself were apparently to be graciously permitted to walk the plank. You wouldn't believe that a two-hundred-foot yacht would afford endless opportunities for solitude *à deux*, but I assure you that for those four or five days that we and the *Starling* were drifting in toward Port Limon, there were very few minutes of sunlight or of moonlight that King didn't manage to spend unperturbed and unmolested in the company of my wife. . . . I think that it must have been fairly obvious to a more casual and less prejudiced observer than myself. Did you notice it, Lindy?"

"Yes," said Lindy. "I noticed it." She sat for a moment twisting the pearls through her fingers, her lashes lying like little wings against the clear pallor of her face. After a moment, with lashes still lowered, she spoke again: "I noticed it quite a lot, and I wanted rather badly to stop it, because I saw how much Hanna hated it—and because I knew that, in a way, it was my fault."

Hanna asked wonderingly, "Your fault, Lindy? How was it your fault?"

"Because—because I think that Doug started out on the *Starling* with the idea of having an agreeable four weeks' flirtation with me. . . . I didn't want to flirt with him, and I told him so. I didn't want to marry him, and I told him so. I didn't want to do anything in the world but be quite still, and let the sunlight lie on my hands all day and the moonlight lie on my eyes all night—and I told him that, too. I thought that the part about getting married was just Doug's idea of small

talk, of course, but even that I didn't find especially ingratiating. And when he started flirting with Hanna, I thought that he was trying to make me jealous. I didn't dream, I didn't dream . . . oh, well, you can see what a preposterous little lunatic I was—self-centred and vain, and utterly oblivious of what should have been perfectly obvious to an imbecile. At first I was amused, and then I was annoyed, and then I was really worried, because I saw how abominably it was upsetting Hanna. But I was so lazy and selfish and stupid that I simply let things drift—because I knew that in a day or so we'd be at Port Limon, and Doug would be transferring to Panama—and because I didn't think that a little of Doug's romantic nonsense would do Hanna any harm."

"I shouldn't have called your friend Doug essentially a romanticist," said Gavin Dart quietly. "He was sufficiently materialistic to decide that the quickest way to get at Hanna permanently was to get rid of me permanently. And he decided that the quickest way to do that was to murder me. . . . I played beautifully into his hands. It isn't in any way either my fault or his that he didn't succeed."

He stirred a little, watching the long shudder ripple down from the beautiful bare shoulder to the beautiful bare hand beside him—then, dropping his hand over the long fingers, he went on slowly:

"I made up my mind well before we reached Costa Rica that nothing in God's world—or the devil's—would make me lift a finger to interfere in this—affair—between Doug and Hanna. If this was the man that she wanted, this was the man that she should have. I swore that I would cut off my hand before I lifted a finger to stop it—that I would cut out my tongue before I lifted my voice.

Twice before—no, three times before—I had played the fool and humiliated us both so that we were ashamed to meet each other's eyes for days, by unleashing my misery and my vileness on her. I seem a rather quiet person, even to myself, but there are times when I am not—quiet. When a harmless, amiable young architect came to see Hanna three afternoons in succession a few years ago, I told her that if he came a fourth time I'd shoot him dead. . . . Well, he came a fourth time, and needless to say, I didn't shoot him dead. I asked him to stay for dinner instead, and I gave Hanna those earrings to plead forgiveness for me, and we all had a very pleasant time. But I don't believe that you forgot that young architect, did you, Hanna?"

"No," she said. "I didn't forget him."

"Nor that nice young Austrian lieutenant in Washington, nor the Harvard boy that winter in Nassau —you didn't forget them either, did you? It was because you remembered him that you were afraid for Doug King. . . ."

He rose abruptly, crossed to the fireplace, and stood leaning against it, staring down into the flickering embers.

"I kept my tongue quiet and my hands off during that run into Port Limon, but it didn't help my sleeping any. I'm an abominable sleeper even when I haven't anything on my mind, and those nights I had something rather urgent on my mind. King was to leave us at Port Limon—he had business in Panama, and was going to transfer to a fruit boat headed for there while we went up in the mountains to explore San José. The night before we got there Lindy went down to pack at about ten; King and Hanna were somewhere aft with a lot of cushions and any number of stars to

chaperon them. I decided to turn in, too, and about eleven or so I shut off the lights and decided that I'd see what I could do in the way of sleeping. It wasn't a conspicuous success. . . . It was after twelve when Hanna came in. She had the cabin adjoining mine, and though the door was closed, and she was obviously making an effort to make as little noise as possible, I could hear her moving about quite distinctly. After a few moments the sounds ceased, and I saw the crack of light under the door go out. . . . And then I heard—something else. I heard her crying. Very softly—very, very softly, as though her face was buried in the pillow. That made it just a little bit worse. It's not particularly pleasant to realize that someone that you—care for—is crying a few feet away from you in the darkness, and that you are afraid to go to her, and ask her why. . . . I was afraid. After an hour of it I thought that if I had to listen any longer I'd go stark, staring mad. I got up and put on a bathrobe over my pajamas and so went above to the deck. Just outside the gangway someone in white flannels was standing, leaning against the railing of the boat. It was Doug King.

"He turned around and stood staring at me for a minute, and then asked with just enough concern, 'Anything wrong?' I told him that there was nothing wrong whatever, except that I couldn't sleep, and had decided to see what a little fresh air would do. He said, 'Same here. Is insomnia in your line?' I told him that if I could strike an average of four hours a night I counted myself lucky. King agreed that wasn't enough, and asked if I'd tried anything to break it up. I explained that I couldn't, as I had such a hocked-up affair as a heart that I didn't dare play fast and loose with it by experimenting with soporifics. King said

'Have you got one of those doggone nuisances, too? Brother, shake! But I've got the very thing for you—couldn't hurt an octogenarian with angina pectoris.' He said that a heart specialist in New York had prescribed the stuff for him when he was going through a bad time with neuritis; the things were so mild that he used to take them three times a day regularly as a sedative, or two or three at night if he required a real sleeping powder. He had two left in his cabin; he kept them handy in case of an emergency, and could get the prescription filled in Panama, when he'd mail me some more. We chatted on for a bit—it must have been close on to two when he went down to fetch them from his cabin and he turned them over with the suggestion that I keep them until the following night to give them a real chance, as I'd have to be up and about again in a couple of hours if I was to see him off. I agreed that that was good advice, and that I'd spend what was left of the night with one of the famous British Trials, trying to figure out why Bywaters kept those ruinous letters of Mrs. Thompson's. . . . King got off at dawn. Hanna didn't get up to see him off; it was infernally hot even at that hour of the morning, and she sent up word by her maid that she was having a hard time with her head, and that she had decided to see whether a dark room and ice-packs and an electric fan would do her any good. King left some amiable messages and regrets and vanished over the boat rail into space. . . . That was the last time I saw him until this afternoon."

A log at the back of the fire broke in two with an ominous little crash, and he bent to replace it with the mechanical precision of a sleep-walker. In the light that flared up the circle of eyes stared down at him, filled

with many things—Chatty's with the still inextinguishable tears, Lindy's with soft wonder, Sherry's with hostile incredulity, Larry Redmond's with a quiet and steady question. Of them all, only Hanna's did not follow him. She sat silent, motionless, watching the firelight flicker and ebb in the great square diamonds on her linked hands, so still that it hardly seemed that she breathed.

Kit, replenishing his coffee cup at the hospitably bubbling urn, inquired gently: "And was that all that happened before you saw him this afternoon?"

Gavin Dart straightened as abruptly as though a whip had been cracked across his shoulders. After a moment he said quietly:

"Hardly. If that had been all that happened I should naturally not be trespassing on your time with this extremely personal story. . . . Just before dinner I went down to Hanna's stateroom to see how she was feeling. We had given up the San José trip for the day—it was too infernally hot to stir, and Hanna had kept to her room.

"She was sitting in front of a little mirror in her dressing table when I came in; she'd apparently started to put up her hair, and found it too much for her, because she was just sitting there with her head propped up in her hands, letting the tears run down her face without even troubling to wipe them off. When I saw her like that—when I saw her—crying, so recklessly and so hopelessly, something went off like a pistol in my head.

"I came up behind her, and put one hand on her shoulder and asked, 'If you are so inconsolable for your lover, why don't you follow him?' She dropped her hands, twisted around in her chair, took one long

breath, and went off into the most appalling fit of hysterics that you ever heard in your life. Why everyone on the boat didn't hear her is beyond me. Of course Lindy's cabin was down at the other end and the maid was at supper—still . . . I couldn't stop her, of course. I tried dashing water in her face, and smelling salts, and aromatic spirits of ammonia, but every time I touched her it simply made it worse. I was nearly out of my mind by the time that I remembered Doug King's powders. He'd said they were a sedative—an awfully mild sedative—for quieting the nerves, and that if I took two of them they might make me sleep . . . I dashed into my cabin and mixed them up with half a glass of water, and managed to get most of it down her throat, by alternately going on my knees to her and using brute force. By the time that the steward came knocking at the door, it was beginning to take effect, and she was quite quiet, and a little drowsy—and by the time that I came back from dinner she was very quiet indeed. I hadn't wanted Lindy to suspect that anything was wrong, so I simply said that Hanna's head was rather worse, and that I wanted to get back to her as soon as possible. . . . She seemed to be quite sound asleep when I came in, but she was breathing in a curious, difficult way, and her lips were the strangest bluish colour—and they curled back a little, so that I could see her teeth. The maid said that she hadn't moved since she came back from supper. . . . I bent over to feel her hand and it was cold—cold as ice, in spite of the stifling heat all around us. I tried to find her pulse, and I couldn't find it—as far as I could tell, it had gone. And except for the painful labour of her breath, there was nothing to tell us that Hanna hadn't gone, too."

He paused for a moment, turning abruptly to Sherry, still the lavish but shaken guardian of the decanter.

"Pour me a brandy and soda, will you, Sherry? Rather more brandy than soda, and no ce to speak of. Thanks. . . . I won't go into the rest of that night, if you don't mind. Lindy's told you already what a nightmare of a time we had getting a doctor; it wasn't till after eleven that one of those West Indian cruisers dropped anchor, and we got the ship's doctor and a nice kid from Johns Hopkins on board. I'd got hold of Lindy by then, and we'd done the best we could with whiskey and rum and hot-water bags—I'll never forget what a trump you were that night, Lindy!"

Lindy said softly from the shadows:

"I'll never forget what a trump you were, my dear. You did your level best to keep me from being frightened, when you were half dead with fright yourself."

"I was a little more than half dead," said Gavin Dart slowly. "You see, I thought that I'd murdered her. . . . Not with the powders, understand; I hardly gave them a thought. I believed that it was a total nervous and emotional collapse that had simply been heralded in by the hysterics. Lindy thought it was a heat stroke . . . and then she'd heard somewhere of a kind of turtle poisoning that hit you almost exactly like that; a friend of hers in the Bahamas had had it, and almost floated out to Eternity before anyone realized what had struck her. It all sounded plausible enough; we'd had baked turtle ourselves an evening or so before, and while we were waiting for the doctors I made two or three frantic efforts to believe that it must have been something like that—with not very conspicuous success, I may say. But the young gentleman from Johns Hopkins was even less successful than I."

He stood contemplating the ebbing contents of his glass with a grimly reminiscent smile, fortifying himself with another long, slow drink before he went back to the sick frenzy of the small, hot stateroom on the *Starling*.

"The young gentleman from Johns Hopkins thought it was something quite, quite different. . . . It was after ten the next morning before they pronounced her out of danger and were actually able to turn from symptoms to causes. They were a good deal quicker about it than I at that! . . . I'd explained when they first came that she'd been upset by the heat, had complained of a headache, had been nervous and hysterical—quite unlike herself—and that I'd given her a sedative to quiet her down—but no one seemed to pay any attention to anything that I said at the time. That next morning, though, while they were busy rolling down their sleeves and mopping off their brows and packing things up, young Ladd took up our conversation just about where we'd left off. He asked, 'What kind of drug does Mrs. Dart use?' I said, 'Drug? She doesn't use any drugs. Why?' Ladd said, 'I certainly understood you to say that you had given her some kind of a bromide last night.' I said, 'Oh, that! That wasn't a drug; it was just a very mild sedative that a New York physician recommended as being absolutely safe.' Dr. Ladd stopped packing long enough to raise his eyebrows. Then he asked, rather slowly, 'Who was the physician?' I told him that I couldn't remember—a name like Patterson, I thought. He raised his eyebrows a little higher at that, and asked, 'What was in them?' I said that I didn't know that either; that they'd been turned over to me by a friend of mine who assured me they were too mild to do any damage to an anæmic kitten. The ship's doctor, who was finishing up the bag, remarked pleas-

antly that he wished these guys who handed around dynamite as though it were cough drops could be hung by the neck till dead, and Ladd put his coat on and said that he'd like to know whether my friend was a qualified expert on kittens' stamina. . . . I began to see a little light then—and a good deal of darkness. . . . I said, 'Dr. Ladd, do you think that there's a possibility that those powders might have had something to do with my wife's illness?' He said, '*Think* they had something to do with it? I know damn well they had something to do with it! Her heart gave out. Do you happen to have the containers for the powder anywhere about?'

"I found the papers on the dressing table, and handed them over, but they were just plain white paper, and there wasn't a vestige of the powder left in them. Ladd seemed to find them interesting, however. After a minute he put them down and asked whether my friend the kitten expert advised the use of two. I said, 'He told me they were absolutely safe. But the whole thing's beyond me. I never dreamt for a minute that Hanna had a weak heart.' He said, 'Good God, man, there wasn't anything the matter with her heart. If Mrs. Dart had had a weak heart, she'd have been dead and gone before we got here.'"

Gavin Dart put the empty glass down on the mantel very carefully.

"And that," he remarked pleasantly to the flickering embers, "is that. Any further questions, Kit?"

"I've got some further questions," said Neil Sheridan. He rose, and came toward the mantel a trifle unsteadily, placing a half-filled glass beside the empty one, and directing the incredulous glare that had adorned his visage since the beginning of Dart's narrative full at the grimly controlled countenance of that gentleman. "If

this cock-and-bull yarn of yours has a word of truth in it, why didn't you run Doug out of the country on the strength of it?"

"For two reasons," said Dart slowly. "First, because I didn't care to involve either Hanna or myself in the very ugly scandal that would have resulted from any exposure of King's attempt to murder me. Second, because I had no corroboration of any kind of my story. No one heard me tell King that I had a weak heart; no one heard him tell me to take a double dose of what he assured me was absolutely harmless."

"Well, what makes you think that we're going to fall for it?" inquired Sherry passionately. "Who've you found to corroborate this rigmarole since then?"

Hanna Dart lifted her head abruptly. There were two flicks of scarlet across her cheek-bones, and behind the clear serenity of her eyes little flames danced, menacing and lovely.

"He has me," she said clearly. "I heard him tell Doug King about his heart—and I heard Doug offer him the powders."

Dart said:

"Hanna, your cabin was at the opposite end of the boat. I've slashed every atom of pride that I have to ribbons to-night because you thought that you could help me by telling a lie. Don't try to help me again by telling another one."

"Gavin, it isn't a lie. I heard you go out of your cabin, and I went after you. I was afraid that you were going to find Doug—I was afraid that he'd tell you——" She checked herself, wrung her hands hard together, and went on steadily, "I stood halfway down the companionway for quite a while—oh, almost half an hour—listening to you both talk. And then I began to feel so

deathly sick that I was afraid that I was going to faint . . . so I went back to my cabin."

Sherry said bitterly:

"I'll certainly hand it to you two for good fancy team-work! Why didn't you tell anyone that Doug King was going around trying to murder your husband?"

"I didn't believe that Doug was trying to murder him. I didn't believe that people murdered each other—not people you knew. I wasn't even sure that it was those powders that Gavin gave me. . . . That whole night was like a dreadful dream, and Gavin said it was the heat that had made me so sick. He did say so."

Kit Baird asked quietly: "What was it that you were afraid that King would tell Gavin, Hanna?"

She said in a voice hardly above a whisper:

"I was afraid that Doug would tell him that I wanted him to set me free—that he ought to set me free, because he was so much older, and that I didn't really love him, that I was only sorry for him. . . . Doug told me that he would have to tell him that if I wouldn't be—kind to him."

Kit asked: "And were those things true?"

"True?" Her eyes stared at him, blankly incredulous. "They were dreadful, dreadful lies. But I was afraid that Gavin might believe them. They were all things that Gavin had said—himself."

Her lips trembled suddenly, and she laid her finger across them, as though she were chiding some invisible and recalcitrant child.

Kit asked more gently still: "How did it happen that you saw so much of Doug on the *Starling*, Hanna?"

She said despairingly:

"Oh, Kit, I don't know. At first it was because of Lindy—I thought that Lindy was treating him rather badly, and that it was making him terribly unhappy—and after that because I was . . . afraid. You see, it wasn't till two or three days before we got to Port Limon that he told me that it wasn't Lindy at all—that it was I; that it had always been I; ever since Washington—that he couldn't live without me any longer. And it wasn't till the last day that he told me that he thought that it was his duty to go to Gavin and put the whole case before him. I didn't know how to stop him—I nearly went mad. I nearly go mad when I think of it now."

She rose, cast a desperate look about her, and crossed the space between the love-seat and the mantel, slipping her hand into Gavin Dart's and clinging to it as though she were a lost child instead of a tall goddess.

"Gavin, you promised that you'd never leave me again. Don't leave me, Gavin."

He said, "I'll never leave you."

Kit remarked, amiably casual:

"There's just one thing that I don't quite get, though it's probably perfectly clear. If you had such an unholy dread of having Doug meet your husband, Hanna, why did you bring him down here for this party?"

"Oh, Kit, you don't know how hard I tried not to! I used every excuse in the world, but I'm dreadfully poor about excuses—I tried Jeffrey's cold, and a dinner that we were supposed to go to, and a luncheon that we were supposed to be giving—but he simply brushed them all aside, because he said that I was looking pale and a change would do me good—and besides that, he wanted to meet the rest of the March Hares."

"And why were you so anxious to come, Dart, under the circumstances?"

"I wanted to see Hanna and King together again," said Gavin Dart. "I'd made up my mind that if she were really interested in him I ought to place the facts of the *Starling* episode before her and let her decide what she wanted to do—or to have me do. . . . I wasn't entirely clear that a murderer would make a good husband, but I was willing to be convinced."

"And what do you think now?" inquired Sherry unpleasantly.

"What I think now is slightly academic, isn't it?"

"Like hell it is! What are you going to do—give Hanna a divorce, or let her find out for herself what it feels like to have a murderer for a husband?"

Gavin Dart did not stir; only his eyes narrowed for a moment bleakly.

"Are you by any chance implying that I murdered Doug King?"

Sherry glared back at him, somewhat staggered by the unshaken calm of the level voice.

"Are you by any chance implying that you didn't?"

"I'm implying nothing whatever. I am assuring you that the first intimation that I had of harm having arrived to Douglas King was after I opened the door from the service quarters and saw you all standing there with the lights on."

Sherry, stupor still claiming him as its own, waved this aside with a frantically derisive gesture.

"Ah, tell that to the marines! Tell it to the judge and the jury and the whole world if you want to, but don't try to pull it on me! What were you stringing us with all this rotten rigmarole about Doug and poisoned powders and agonizing jealousy for if you weren't getting ready

to alibi yourself out of the electric chair with a lot of hokum about the unwritten law?"

"I was simply trying to explain that Hanna had ample reason to think that I was likely to make a fool of myself, and that that was why she had taken refuge in some rather damaging lies in order to protect me. Evidently I haven't made a distinguished success of my explanation."

"I'll say you haven't! You may sound noble to the rest of the world, but you sound damn suspicious to me. I loved King better than a brother, and I'm not going to let any——"

Trudi cut coldly across the thickened voice that was wavering perilously on the edge of tears.

"Sherry, you really are making the most sickening ass of yourself. Why don't you sit down and keep your mouth shut until it's your turn to answer questions?"

"Do you have to tell everyone in the world what you think about me, Trudi?" asked the luckless Sherry. "I know darn well what you think about me, and I'll tell 'em any time they ask me. I'll tell 'em now. You think I'm the rottenest, lousiest——"

"Sherry, you're drunk," said Kit Baird critically. "You're almost drunk enough to be entertaining, but not quite. My advice to you is to go out and hold your head under the cold water faucet until you feel normalcy descending on you once more. . . . All kinds of things must have been going on around here that I've missed out on, anyway. How long have you been our district attorney?"

"Can't anyone ask a question around this place without getting permission from you?" demanded Sherry passionately. "What is this, anyhow—a close corporation? A lot you care who murdered Doug King!

For a plugged nickel you'd have murdered him yourself. You're a fine one to——"

"Sherry, listen to me." Lindy's voice struck across the ugly fever of his clamour as quietly and coolly as rain. "You're destroying the whole structure of order and decency and fairness that we've been trying to build up in the last hour. You simply can't do it. You can't afford to do it, and we can't afford to let you. We'll all go raving mad if we don't keep hold of ourselves . . . Kit, I think that it was outrageous of you to say that Sherry's drunk and to make fun of him. He's obviously knocked to pieces by Doug's death, and you owe him an apology."

"Oh, a dozen of them, if they'll help to restore law and order," acquiesced Kit obligingly. "But I'd take it kindly of you, old boy, if you'd withdraw that little bit about a plugged nickel. That's out. I'm not the boy to fall for a plugged nickel."

Sherry glowered darkly, subdued but unappeased.

"All right—all right—but you didn't waste any love on Doug, and you damn well know it. And who started all this inquiry stuff, anyway? Dart started it himself, didn't he? I'll say he did, and not an hour ago at that! And it was Dart who told us that all we had to do was to find some guy equipped with the means, the motive, and the opportunity for murdering Doug, and then sic the police on him, wasn't it? I'll say it was! Well, we've found a man, not two feet away from where I'm standing, haven't we? I'll say we——"

"Sherry, what's that on your arm?" Hanna's grave, lovely voice trailed unhurriedly across the hot insistence.

"What's what on my arm?"

"All that white stuff, just below your elbow?"

"That stuff? Search me—dust or powder or something; I probably brushed against one of you girls."

Hanna touched the long white blur delicately with an exploratory finger tip.

"It's much too white for dust and much too thick for powder. What should you say that it was, Gavin?"

"It looks like flour to me. You might have picked it up in the kitchen—or no, that's out! You weren't in the kitchen, were you? How about it, Lindy? Any flour scattered around the house?"

"Only the bowlful that we were going to do the ring trick with."

"Oh, yes—the ring trick." He swept the room with a swiftly appraising eye. "Now I wonder what became of that bowl?"

Trudi shook her head at him with a dispirited grin.

"Nothing doing, Sherlock; you can't pin anything on my lawful wedded husband that way! I swept the pile of flour back into the bowl, and stuck it in the lacquer cabinet over there. . . . No, you're still the boy with the means, the motive, and the opportunity, if that means anything. If it's any consolation to you it leaves me fairly cool. Pretty, but cuckoo—too darned pat, somehow."

Gavin Dart said equably:

"I'll grant that it leaves something to be desired as a formula; still, as a starter, it may prove serviceable. I'll head the line of suspects that is about to form to the right, naturally, but I think that we'll have some more recruits before we're through. And before we abandon the flour theme entirely, suppose you show me just which table you brushed it off of."

"The little one over there in the corner, near the tub with the apples in it."

"Near the tub with the knife in it," corrected Gavin Dart gently. He crossed the room leisurely, and stood inspecting the table with more than perfunctory interest. "You didn't make a very tidy job of sweeping off your flour, Trudi—there's quite a bit left. . . . Baird, come here for a moment, will you?"

Joel joined the two hanging over the table, his eyes on fire with a curiosity that he endeavoured to conceal beneath a coolly scientific detachment.

"Now why in heck do you suppose it makes that funny little track down the centre of the table?"

"Let's find out," suggested Dart. "When you retraced your steps through this room, groping your way along the wall, you collided with the tub just short of this table, didn't you?"

"I'll tell the world I did!"

"Did you run into the table, too?"

"Nope—I stopped groping after that and lit out catty-cornered for the hall doors."

"But if you had been coming *from* the hall, feeling your way in the dark, what would have happened then, I wonder? Or even if you had been crossing from the sofa? Try this, will you, Joel? Close your eyes, and start from anywhere over there by the hall door. No—wait a moment; get this before you start. Remember that you're supposed to know that this tub is here, and that there's a table just short of it. Remember that it's pitch dark, and that it's vitally important to you that you shouldn't make a noise, but it's also vitally important that you should get to the tub as rapidly as possible. Got all that straight? All right—start."

The circle about the fire leaned forward, tense and bewildered, watching the tall figure with the conscientiously screwed-up eyes and the young excited grin grop-

ing his cautious way along the wall, absorbed as a small boy intent on Blindman's Buff. But the two men in the corner, watching his progress with a curious disquieting concentration, did not seem to find the game particularly amusing.

"Here's the table," muttered Joel, the grin deepening. "Check! And about a yard or so farther on there ought to be that double-damned tub—righto—check again!" He opened his eyes, blazing with excitement. "Now will someone kindly step up and tell me just why anyone in his senses would want to head for that confounded tub if he knew it was there? Why, for Pete's sake, wouldn't he——"

He bit off the end of his sentence with a sharp sound of enlightenment as his eye fell once more on the reddened water at his feet.

"By golly, the knife! You actually mean that someone planned from the very beginning to get rid of it there, so that there wouldn't be any finger prints or anything? That someone worked out all the landmarks and——"

"Lift your arm, will you, Hardy? No, the left one."

Joel lifted it obligingly, and a little sigh of incredulous wonder rose from the circle about the fire. Even across the room they could see it quite clearly—the long, thick white slur, running from cuff to elbow against the black sleeve of the dinner jacket.

It was Sheridan who saw it first. He pushed his glass from him so violently that half its contents splashed across the gleaming perfection of Hanna's gown, and plunged toward the group by the table.

"Here, what is this, anyway? What's all this stuff about flour got to do with who killed Doug King? You aren't going to get your neck out of the halter by trying

to put mine in it, let me tell you, and you won't put mine in it by finding a white spot on my sleeve. Are you telling me that I——"

"I'm not telling you anything just now, Sheridan." Gavin Dart spoke a little absently, as though his mind were on more important matters than halters. "You weren't in this room at all before Jill screamed, were you? I mean after the game started, naturally."

"I told you where I was."

"The attic, wasn't it? Way up on the fourth floor in the attic—the farthest away of any of us from what is popularly referred to as the scene of the crime. So naturally you couldn't have been here after the gong sounded. No, it must have been before. . . . Jill, would you mind coming over here for a minute? Come with her, Larry, if you want to. It's all right, I promise—you don't have to go near this thing. Now, Jill, can you remember just where you were standing when Doug told you that he was going to hide on the sofa?"

"I was standing here—by this window. I was trying to see what the wind had done to those trees."

"About eight or ten feet from where we're standing then. And you were whispering, weren't you? Can you remember what he said to you? Just a sentence will do."

"He said——"

"Just whisper it, will you?"

"He said——" The whisper wavered for a second and then resumed steadily, "He said, 'How about the big sofa in front of the fire? Nobody in God's world will ever think of that.'"

"Thanks—that's just what I wanted. Could you hear that, Baird?"

"Perfectly."

"You, Hardy?"

"Sure I could hear it."

"How about you, Sheridan?"

Sherry said with the uncanny distinctness of one to whom distinctness has become a somewhat onerous effort:

"I may be drunk, but I'm not anywhere near drunk enough not to see what you're driving at. Now get this straight once and for all, will you? The first time I heard that Doug was going to hide on that sofa was when Jill was answering one of your famous cross-examinations an hour or so ago. I wasn't eavesdropping on Doug to find out where I could murder him, and I'll bet anyone in God's world ten thousand dollars that you don't even think I was, you——"

"It would be a little difficult to prove what I'm thinking, even by me," remarked Gavin Dart drily, "so let's stick to outward and visible signs, shall we? And will you start in again by telling us exactly where you were when——"

"I'll tell you just exactly nothing," shouted the luckless Sherry, hysteria once more clutching at his shoulder. "If you want to try to save your rotten neck by pinning this murder on someone else, try pinning it on someone but the only friend Doug's got in this room, will you? Try pinning it on Joel Hardy or Kit Baird or Tom Ross —every last one of 'em out after his scalp—sure, you fellows all belong to the same union! Doug told me so himself—he told me so to-night." He strangled for a moment, brushing aside the chilled disdain of Trudi's "Oh, Sherry, for the love of the Lord!" with a gesture of despairing vehemence. "Trudi, lay off me just for once, will you? Go ahead, Dart, ask some of these boys

what they thought of Doug—just ask them, will you? Ask Larry Redmond for a starter. You weren't so damn fond of Doug, were you, Larry?"

"No," said Larry briefly and explicitly.

"I'll say you weren't! And neither were you, were you, Kit?"

"And neither was I," agreed the red-headed young man gently.

"You were in this room about two minutes before Jill screamed, Joel. Why don't you go ahead and tell Inspector Dart how much you loved Doug?"

Joel said in a tone that matched Sherry's for violence:

"You know darned well what I thought about Doug King—I thought he was a bounder and a rotter and a cad—and I still think so. But I don't go around bumping everyone off just because I think they're bums. I'd have a swell time if I did! If you weren't up to any more mischief in this room than I was, you're sitting pretty."

"And just cut this room stuff out, will you? There isn't a soul in the world that can prove I was anywhere near this room! Just because I've got some flour on my cuff—for all I know, you've all got flour on your cuffs, or your skirts, or your elbows! Look at Chatty Ross; she's got some on her shoulder, hasn't she? Does that make her a murderess or doesn't it?"

Chatty echoed in a small stupefied voice, twisting her curly head in a vain effort to verify his statement,

"On my shoulder, Sherry? How could it be on my shoulder? I haven't been near the flour—not once, truly. Not even when Jill was trying to do the ring trick."

"Well, there you are—there's Chatty's bright explanation of how she got it! And while you're playing Grand Inquisitor around here, Dart, why not try it on some

of the girls? Or are you thinking that Lady Macbeth was the last lady to stick a knife into a gentleman?"

Trudi cut in coldly and bitterly:

"If you're trying to throw suspicion on everyone in the room, Sherry, I think that it would be prettier to duck behind coat-tails instead of petticoats. Gavin's not forgetting the ladies. . . . Bend over, Chatty, and I'll brush you off."

"Wait just a moment, will you?" Gavin Dart's voice was reassuringly friendly. "Chatty, do you remember which side——"

Sherry demanded wildly:

"Trudi, what are you driving at with that stuff about ducking behind coat-tails? Are you in on this? Do you believe that I killed Doug King?"

Trudi said wearily:

"Lord, no. I don't think you'd kill a bat. . . . Give me a cigarette, will you, Tom? I've smoked twenty-two since this thing started."

"You know what I thought about Doug. You know what——"

"I'll say I know! Can a wife testify for her husband, Gavin? Doug and Sherry were as thick as—thieves. They had a whole lot in common. Sherry isn't faking any sorrow for your benefit; he was crazy about Doug."

Gavin remarked pleasantly:

"Thanks; any sidelights of that kind are just what we want. Now, Chatty, can you tell us on which side the person passed you in the north corridor just after Jill screamed?"

She knitted soft brows in a valiant effort to follow him. "On which side, Gavin?"

"Did the person pass on your left or on your right?"

"Oh, yes—I see. It was on this side, Gavin—on my left."

"On your left. Exactly. Hardy, you're about Sheridan's height, aren't you—five eleven or thereabouts?"

"Eleven and a half."

"Excellent. Now, Chatty, we need you. Brush that stuff off your shoulder, and then just stand right between us and the door—that's it exactly. Help us out again, will you, Joel? Start from the fireplace; imagine that it's dark again, but this time you're running—down a corridor, fast. You have your arms lifted to ward anything off. You pass Chatty on your right, please, brushing against her. When I count three, you're off. Now—one, two, three—go!"

Joel tore by like a puppy off a leash. Long since, he had forgotten that it was a murder that they were avenging and a murderer that they were hunting. He remembered only that it was a game—an enthralling, an intoxicating game, in which, for a moment, he was being permitted to play the leading rôle. . . . Chatty staggered from the zealous energy of his impact, and Gavin Dart checked him with an outflung arm.

"Steady on, young fellow! Turn this way, Chatty—no, all the way round, so that everyone can see your new flour patch. Sheridan, do you want to ask her again where she got the flour from?"

Sherry, staring at the neat white patch on the dark blue shoulder, said thickly:

"There's no more proof that she got it from me than that I got it from her, and you know it."

"Oh, come, come! Chatty couldn't very well drag her shoulder through the flour on that table—even though she's small enough to fit nicely under your arm. No, I think that two or three things are fairly self-

evident by now! It's the six or eight that aren't that I'm interested in."

Trudi remarked dispassionately:

"Flour or no flour, if you think that Sherry killed Doug, you're barking up the wrong tree. Why in Heaven's name should he want to kill him?"

Gavin, looking at the tired eyes above the undaunted mouth, said thoughtfully:

"A motive? Oh, I think that I could even supply a motive, if it's necessary. But I'm after something more than that."

"What more?"

"Trudi, I'm after a confession. Nothing else is going to help us much, I'm afraid. As far as the means, motive, and the opportunity go, any one of us might have had the knife—any one of us might have been in the room—any one of several of us, according to Sherry, might have had the motive. . . . No—it's not as simple as that, I'm afraid. But I think that it will be simple when we get the answer to half a dozen questions that have been bothering me ever since I've started. Only first I want to try a little experiment."

"Why not start with the questions? I'm good at answering questions."

"Well, you might be thinking over the answer to some of these while we're working out the experiment. So might some of the rest of us, if it comes to that! First, I'd like to find out what it was that King had to say to Lindy when he called her upstairs, just before the game started."

Lindy, deep in the jade chair, looked up from her twisted pearls with something too shadowy and elusive to be quite a smile.

"Would you, Gavin?"

"I would indeed. And then I'd like to know what it was that upset Ray so badly while she was upstairs looking for the aspirin—I caught just a bit of what she said to Joel when she came down—just enough to make me want to hear more."

The small creature huddled forlornly on the trivet did not offer to gratify his curiosity; she continued to stare at him solemnly, from the depths of a stupor that had long since deprived her of such minor comforts as words.

"Then after we get that straight, I want to know just why Sheridan was so clear that Joel, Kit, Ross, and Larry had it in for Doug—and I'm also somewhat intrigued by all that idle chatter over the card table about Panama and points south."

"I'm the very fellow to help you about that," offered the red-headed young man helpfully from the doorway. "Doug was trying to tell you that it was in Panama that I——"

"Kit, for God's sake!" cut in Joel Hardy frantically. "Larry, are you going to stand there and let him——"

"Just keep out of this for a minute, young fellow, if it's all the same to you." His swift smile rested for a moment on Joel's horrified countenance. "King was anxious to remind me that I'd been thrown out of a club in Panama during one of his sojourns there for playing cards not wisely, but too well. Does that help you out any, Dart?"

"I wonder. I've got a notion, Baird, that you'd play your cards both wisely and well—even a poor hand. I'm inclined to think that this rather proves it." He drew his finger thoughtfully along the little path of flour, and said more thoughtfully still, "I don't believe that I'll ask you whether that charge was warranted."

"Thanks," said Kit, and the smile flashed again.

"It'll make it pleasanter all around. I'm a rotten liar."

Larry Redmond, slipping an arm through Kit's, asked briefly: "What's your experiment?"

"Yes—the experiment, of course. It's a very old-fashioned and melodramatic one, but they still use it in France, and I have a definite reason for doing it now. If you'll all help me, I'd like to reconstruct the crime."

There was a moment of petrified silence, broken by the irrepressible Joel.

"You mean put out the lights, and strike the gong, and go over the whole thing? Golly!"

Jill asked in a voice so low that it was barely audible: "You mean that you are going to bring that—sofa back in this room?" She caught at the tall winged chair nearest her, her knees literally sagging beneath her as she reached it.

"Oh, I hardly think that will be necessary. What I want to do is to turn out all the lights and have everyone go to the places that they were in at the time that they heard Jill scream. When I give the signal, she will scream again, and you'll all get to these doors as quickly as you can—just as you did before, of course. I'm out of it, and so is Ray, as neither of us turned up till later. . . . Anyone have any objections to this?"

Jill slumped forward suddenly in her chair, her head on her knees. She said in a small colourless voice: "I'm sorry . . . I think—I think I'm going to faint."

Lindy was at her side in a soft rush. "Darling, what is it? Larry, get some water."

Jill whispered:

"I can't stay in this room in the dark. I can't. I can't. Larry, don't let them make me."

"That's out, Dart," said Larry briefly. "No one shall

make you do anything in heaven or earth that you don't want to, my darling. Try to drink a little of this, won't you?"

Lindy stood considering for a moment, her delicate brows knitted. "You want someone to be here simply to scream as a signal, don't you, Gavin?"

"Exactly."

"Then why not let me do it? I was so close that I was practically in the room, anyway. I can stand over there by the fireplace just as well, if you want me to."

"As I've said before, you're worth a dozen of us, Lindy. Ray, suppose you and I patrol the outposts to make sure that everyone is in their proper place before the signal is given. We'll do it together, naturally—hand in hand, if it makes you more comfortable. And Jill shall go with Larry to the linen presses. The rest of you to the positions that you were in when you heard Jill's scream. Are you all ready? You can go to your places with the lights on, if you'd rather. I'll turn them out after we make our patrol . . . and when the last light —the one in this hall—goes out, it's the signal for you to scream, Lindy. Count ten, slowly, and then scream."

She said, "Count ten—I understand. Do we start now?"

"Yes. That means you to the chapel, Ross; Chatty to the north corridor; Hanna just outside the Priest's Room, Kit in the room off the library, and Sherry in the attic. You're in Chatty's room, Trudi, and Joel's in that warren of baggage rooms. . . . Dash a little water on those embers, Kit; we don't want it flaring up. . . . Come on, Ray. We're off to patrol them and turn out the lights. Sure that you don't mind being left here alone, Lindy?"

"Sure." Her eyes followed him, unswerving, across the room . . . across the hall . . . up the little turn that the

stairs took. . . . She turned back to the shelter of the green chair by the fire, spreading her tulle skirts, folding her slim hands . . . waiting, silent and alert. . . .

Upstairs Trudi called, and Joel's voice answered, young and buoyant and excited. She did not move.

After a moment there were quick feet on the stairs, and Gavin's voice called down:

"Sorry to keep you waiting. . . . Sherry couldn't get into the attic; the trapdoor was locked. Has it a spring lock?"

"A spring lock? I didn't know that it had."

"He says that it must have sprung to after him—at any rate, we left him at the top of the ladder. Here go the lights . . . are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Count ten, slowly, remember. We're off."

"One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven . . . eight . . . nine . . . ten——"

It rang out frantically, appallingly, as though all the pent-up terror of those last terrible hours were unleashed in one frenzied breath—and in the second's balance of utter silence that followed it something else rang out, too.

Something else—something gay and young and enchanted—something more terrifying than any scream or any silence:

Sunny's tune, singing quietly to itself in the darkness, on the cracked old phonograph—Sunny's tune, that everyone had forgotten—singing of stars . . . and youth . . . and love. . . . And over it and beyond it rose the terrified pandemonium of voices.

VII

ABOVE those startled voices it sang peacefully and clearly on, completing that old, lost tale that none of them had wanted to hear—that forgotten tale of magic and starlight and youth, touched with the charmed nostalgia of all lost and lovely things. . . . It was Gavin Dart's cool, clipped voice that cut sharply across its singing and the rising surge of voices that almost drowned it out.

"Will everyone be good enough to stand exactly where they are? I mean that literally; don't move a step. And it will help if you don't make a sound, either. Don't let go of my hand, Ray; just stand where you are and stretch out your other hand till it touches the door frame. I want to make a barrier across this hall door. Never mind the lights; I'll get them in a second. . . . All right—here goes!"

They flared up magnificently just as the little black disk spun peacefully off into silence and quiet under the frantically incredulous eyes turned to it.

Gavin Dart was the only one who did not so much as glance in its direction. His eyes were on another disk—a small white one on his wrist, and they were narrowed in a very passion of concentration.

"Exactly two minutes and ten seconds. . . . Are we all here?"

Sherry's voice called from the head of the stairs, breathless and incoherent:

"Wait a bit, will you? I took the wrong turn on the

third floor—there's a damned jog in the hall that brings you out beyond the stairs, and I——"

"It was you that we were waiting for, Sheridan," said Gavin Dart. "It was for your especial benefit that I waited almost a minute to turn the lights on. Come down and join us, won't you? You had a rendezvous with us here almost forty-five seconds ago."

Sherry, thrusting his way through the crowd in the hall, said sullenly:

"I took the wrong turn, I'm telling you. . . . What's the matter with all of you, anyway? What are you gawking at that darned phonograph for?"

Chatty answered in a small, hushed voice, too charged with awe even to tremble: "Sherry, it was playing . . . Sherry, it was playing Sunny's tune."

"Never mind the phonograph for a moment, please, Chatty. Let's find out first, Sheridan, why you took that wrong turn now and didn't take it at midnight? At midnight, if you remember, you were a long sight farther from the room than you were this time—you'd managed to waft yourself through a locked trapdoor into some remote corner of the attic itself—and yet in the pitch dark you got yourself out of the attic, down the ladder, through all those corridors, down two other long flights of stairs, and into this room, straight as a homing pigeon, in a little over a minute flat, according to the estimate of some of us here—in under two minutes, according to the most generous of us. . . . Why couldn't you repeat that distinguished performance of yours, Sheridan?"

Sherry said in a voice too weary for bravado:

"I told you why, twice. I got balled up on the turn."

"You're balled up on more than the turn, I'm afraid. You won't blame me later for not reminding you that

candour is your surest refuge in time of trouble, will you? Because I'm reminding you of it now." He paused, waiting expectantly, his chilled eyes on Sherry's sullen and disordered countenance. After a moment he said smoothly: "Very well, then. I think that as we aren't to be vouchsafed any assistance on your part, we'll manage to get on excellently without it. Tom, I want you to go on an errand for me. . . . Or no—wait a moment. Are you all standing just where you were at ten minutes past midnight?"

Trudi said wearily:

"Of course we're not. In the first place, that phonograph thing brought us all in here on the run, and in the second place, you told us to stand still exactly where we were when you spoke. Why didn't you turn on the lights, without all that chatter about not moving a hand or a foot?"

"Because I was performing this experiment for a perfectly definite purpose, Trudi. It was, I regret to say, a trap to catch Sherry, and phonograph or no phonograph, I couldn't spring that trap for at least two minutes. My watch has a luminous dial, you know, so I simply held off the lights until the time was up."

Joel demanded excitedly:

"Yes, but after all, you can't laugh that phonograph off, can you? How does that fit in, for Pete's sake? What's it all about, anyway?"

"It strikes me as fairly simple. It means that someone was moving about in this room who had no earthly business to be here—and that for some reason of their own they were very near the phonograph. Suppose we check up on who is in the room now. You, Lindy, naturally. And Tom—you came in from the chapel,

didn't you? That leaves Jill to be accounted for. How did you happen to be here, Jill?"

She said, clinging to the back of the chair by the door, her face turned so that she could not see Larry's astounded eyes: "I thought I was meant to be here."

"And what made you think that?"

"Because—because this was where I was when it—happened."

"But, Jill, I told you perfectly distinctly that you were to be up with Larry in the linen presses. And you were certainly there when Ray and I were checking up on positions."

"Was I? I don't remember. I don't remember anything very well."

She swayed slightly, and something in the blinded pathos of the small sad face tempered the steel in his voice.

"Just try to tell us what happened, will you? We all want to help you."

"I can't tell you."

Larry asked from the hall, his face drained of every vestige of colour:

"Let me get in there to her, will you, Dart? You can see for yourself that she isn't fit to answer questions. I'll tell you anything you want to know, I swear."

Gavin Dart dropped the arm that still formed a barrier across the door, and Larry went straight to the girl in the green smock, gathering her up and putting her into the nearest chair as though she were the exhausted child that she looked.

"It's all my fault, Blessed. I shouldn't have let you go. Don't shiver like that—nothing's going to hurt you."

She whispered:

"Larry—Larry, it was Sunny. . . . She came back to finish the tune—she came back to tell us——"

Gavin Dart said gravely:

"I'm afraid that it wasn't Sunny, Jill. Now, Redmond, perhaps you'll be good enough to tell us what all this means?"

"The whole thing's my fault. Jill went completely to pieces after you left us out in the presses; she was out of her head with terror at the idea of being in the dark up there, and she'd got the idea that there was still blood on her hands and on her dress—she told me that unless she could get to her room and get rid of that blood, she'd go stark, staring mad. I knew that the knife had been found, and there didn't seem any point in keeping everyone under surveillance, since that was so—so I let her go."

"Did you go with her?"

"No—she wouldn't let me come with her; she said that I'd be expected to go through this test and that if I didn't it might get me into trouble."

"I see. Now, Jill, will you tell us why you didn't go to your room?"

"I can't tell you. It was Sunny—it was Sunny's tune——"

"But you must have started down the stairs the moment I put the light out—even before Lindy screamed—certainly before you could have heard the tune. You were in the room when I told everyone to stand still, weren't you?"

"Was I?" The blue eyes stared at him piteously out of the frozen terror of her face.

"Dart, go easy with her just for a bit, can't you?" Larry kept his own voice level with an effort that tightened every muscle in his body. "Just give her a

chance to get hold of herself—she won't be any good even to you if she goes out of her head, will she? She's in a state now where you could get her to say absolutely anything. You could probably get her to say that she did it herself. Is that what you want?"

Gavin Dart said slowly: "No; no, that's not what I want."

And the frozen voice from the chair said: "You couldn't make me say that, Gavin. Not that—not ever."

"No; I don't believe that I could. Very well, Jill—only just remember when you're ready that we'll all be grateful for any help that you can give us. Now for the errand: Tom, will you run up to the third floor and see what kind of a lock that trapdoor at the head of the ladder to the attic has on it? You know your way about, don't you? Thanks." He paused on his way across the room to call after the disappearing figure: "Turn on any lights that you need up there, naturally." Just short of the phonograph, resting small and dark and inscrutable on its little stand to the left of the fireplace, he halted, surveying it for a moment with compressed lips. The irrepressible Joel bounded after him, the puppy-off-the-leash motif so apparent in his approach that even the sternness of Dart's tired face relaxed slightly.

"Now how do you size that thing up?" he demanded eagerly. "Look, I'll tell you how I've doped it out." He moved forward, swinging the arm of the machine back into position and drawing a triumphant finger down the long gash across the record. "That's where Kit dragged it across when he stopped it to-night while Lindy was dancing with Doug, see? Only the gash stops about an inch or so before the record ends, see, and it was that inch and a half that someone started playing. That's

why it ran on smoothly, without jarring over the scratch! So the only question is, why did they start it?"

Dart commented with a somewhat grim smile:

"Well, hardly the only one, I'm afraid; still, it's undoubtedly one of them. There are two possible explanations for the thing starting off; there may be more, for all I know. It might have been started deliberately in order to create a distraction that would permit someone to accomplish a purpose that we can only guess at. On the other hand, someone may have set off the release catch accidentally while they were trying to accomplish something quite different—and again it's a pure matter of speculation as to what the objective was. Which strikes you as the more plausible, Baird?"

"Either," said Kit Baird. He came toward them from the doorway with that long, light stride, measuring the distance between the door to the service quarters and the stand by the fireplace with an appraising eye. "The stand's rather low; still, someone crossing over from the service quarters to the hall might have brushed against it—or someone crossing from the hall to the service quarters. What should you say could have been the object in deliberately starting it, Dart?"

"Oh, your guess is as good as mine! To bring us all back earlier, perhaps? To cover up some noise that it was essential to keep unheard? To spoil what someone guessed to be the object of my plan? . . . It's all pure speculation. Well, one of the first things that we can do is to narrow it down to the people who actually had access to this room. Lindy was here already, of course——and Jill—and Tom could have reached it from the chapel. Does that cover it?"

"Well, hardly!" murmured Kit, and for a moment his

eyes danced. "You aren't forgetting your honourable self out in the hall?"

"Thanks for reminding me." A somewhat wintry smile replied from the gray eyes. "Fortunately for me, Ray had my wrist in an iron grip during our entire sojourn in the hall. You'll back that, Ray?"

"I never let go once—not once."

"There remains, of course, the possibility of practically anyone in the house coming down these stairs as Jill did, while Lindy was counting. Or someone might have found it more convenient to slip down the backstairs and through that way. I hadn't counted on anything of the kind for a minute, which shows the lucidity of my state of mind at present. Though I swear I'm still in the dark as to why anyone should have wished to return to this room."

"Maybe to get something that they'd left behind," suggested the indefatigable Joel. "Or else to leave something that they wanted to get rid of. Or——"

"I hardly think that they'd choose this general rendezvous of ours as a particularly attractive dumping ground for incriminating débris," commented Gavin Dart drily. "But there certainly may be something in your first suggestion. Of course it was running a desperate risk of discovery. . . . Lindy, did you hear anything out of the way in the room between the time that the light went out and the phonograph started?"

Lindy, still at her post near the spot where the sofa had stood, knitted soft brows in concentration.

"I'm not sure, Gavin. I did hear sounds of some kind, but I thought that probably it was you and Ray in the hall—I wasn't paying much attention, you see, because I was counting . . . Gavin, why don't you make Hanna

come over here and sit down? She looks absolutely worn out. You come, too, Ray, and Larry will push Jill's chair closer. We might as well all sit down, surely . . ."

Kit, eyes still on the phonograph, inquired pensively, "Did you hear anyone out in the hall, Gavin? Before Lindy screamed, I mean?"

"Yes. I heard someone running down the stairs; as it turns out, it was probably Jill."

"But you didn't try to stop her?"

"I was particularly anxious not to stop anyone. One of my objects in this performance—outside of the necessity of proving the fact that Sherry was lying—was to give everyone just a little more rope than they needed, and see what they would do with it. I thought that the results might prove illuminating."

"A little more than we needed," repeated Kit Baird slowly. "Enough to hang us with, perhaps? We should be grateful to you, Dart." He picked up a log, coaxing the dead embers skilfully back to life, the enigmatic smile still flickering. "And you didn't hear anyone pass you in the hall?"

"No," said Gavin Dart curtly. "I heard no one." He crossed to the decanter on the tabouret and emptied a generous portion of it into a glass, adding more curtly still, "Nevertheless, someone passed me."

"Pour out one for me, there's a good Samaritan, before you enlighten us as to your latest discovery."

"Soda, too? Is that about right? . . . Oh, the explanation doesn't do any particular credit to my acumen! When I told you all to stand perfectly still and asked Ray to help me make a barrier across that door, I spoke just a fraction of a second too late—someone had already brushed by me coming out of this room."

Kit, something just short of mockery edging his voice,

abandoned the fire, and swung himself lightly onto the table edge.

"Very, very indiscreet of the brusher, if you ask me. The poor devil probably didn't know about that rope. You haven't figured out yet who it was?"

"No. I've figured out exactly nothing—except that you were in the writing room off the library, a few yards away."

Kit's eyebrows went up in mild astonishment.

"I? Dart, you aren't telling me that it's I that you've caught in this trap that you set for Sherry?"

Gavin said wearily: "I'm telling you that it's beginning to look as though every last one of us is so deep in this that it would take more than a lifetime to get us out of it."

Joel, still hovering over the phonograph as though it were a toy that he was loath to relinquish, lifted an imperious voice.

"Hey, Dart, how about this? Why mightn't someone have hid something near this darn thing, and come back when the lights were out to get it?"

Gavin inquired drily: "What kind of a thing, for instance?"

"I haven't worked that out yet. Something darned incriminating, anyway, that it was up to them to get hold of good and quick. This stand is too low for anyone to brush against so that you'd start it up accidentally, shouldn't you think? But you certainly might catch a cuff or a sleeve in it if you were poking around trying to get something out of this cabinet part down here. Or even if you were trying to stuff something in it. Hey, how about that for an idea? Suppose there's something in it right now——"

He tugged ruthlessly at the doors to the little cabinet,

swollen and warped by years of neglect, and abruptly they swung open, revealing to eager eyes only a small cavern of darkness.

"Nothing there?" inquired the tired voice from the sofa. "I rather imagined there wouldn't be; I fear the gods aren't very kindly disposed to us to-night. . . . Well, Ross, what kind of a lock is it?"

"It's a padlock," said Tom Ross, coming slowly into the room. "Rather a large padlock, on a pair of good solid iron staples."

"Rather a large padlock," repeated Gavin Dart thoughtfully. "I suppose you had the key for it, Sheridan?"

"Oh, you know damn well I didn't have the key for it." Sherry's voice, violent and despairing, rose from the corner by the door, where he sat huddled wretchedly at the deserted card table, his forehead resting on his linked hands, the untouched whiskey and soda pushed far from him, as though even drink had lost its savour.

"You're right—I know damn well that you haven't got it," agreed Gavin Dart grimly. "And if it comes to that, I know damn well that you were never anywhere near the attic. Furthermore, I strongly suspect that you were right here in this room, in spite of your many and vehement protestations to the contrary. Well, are you ready now to take us into your confidence?"

Sherry, not lifting his head, said tonelessly:

"All right; you win. I wasn't in the attic and I was in the room, and I am a liar. Does that make me a murderer?. . . It didn't make Hanna one."

"Nor you, Sheridan. If that were all in the balance against you, you'd still be as safe as most of us here. It was you who brushed by Chatty in the north corridor, too, wasn't it?"

"You know it was—what are you asking me for?"

"I'd like to keep the record straight if possible. And just so that everything will be perfectly clear, suppose you tell us why you've been telling us lies as fast as you could talk for the last two or three hours?"

"Because I'm a coward," said Sherry, with curious distinctness. He rose, swaying a little, and came toward the group near the fire, catching uncertainly at the backs of chairs, a sorry travesty of his erstwhile dapper self. Even the wings of his immaculate collar drooped forlornly, and against the sleek black of his lapel the white carnation hung limp and sodden. "Because I'm a coward and a liar and a fool. Ask Trudi—she'll tell you. She tells me about once a fortnight."

Trudi asked: "Sherry, haven't you any sense of decency at all?"

"No. I forgot that; I haven't any sense of decency either. The only things I've got in the world are a good heart and a thick head. Trudi'll back me up on that, too, won't you, Trudi?"

Trudi said sombrely: "I'll back you up on anything, if you'll keep quiet."

"Sorry, old girl—I can't very well keep quiet until I've proved to the Grand Inquisitor here that good-hearted, thick-headed jackasses don't go around murdering their best pals. You still rather think that I did it, don't you, Dart?"

"Rather," concurred Dart laconically.

"Gavin, you can't be such a lunatic," said Trudi dispassionately. "Entirely aside from the fact that Sherry is congenitally incapable of hurting a kitten, there's the other fact that he was mad about Doug—really mad about him. You're wasting what may be invaluable time trying to fit Sherry into this simply because he's a

coward. He's told you so himself. He can't bear pain or trouble or danger—when he saw himself headed for all three of them he lost his head and lied. The attic was the farthest place away from all of them that he could think of, and so he put himself in the attic. That's the truth, isn't it, Sherry?"

"That's the truth. I was in the north corridor when Jill screamed. I passed through this room on my way there from the kitchen."

"Well, there you are, Gavin. It's as simple as that. You can't hang a man for losing his head—and the only scrap of evidence that you have against him is that he's lied to you."

"No, no, Trudi—that's where you're wrong. I have two other scraps of evidence against him." He opened his hand, and two oblongs of white paper fluttered down to the dark surface of the table. "These two. Want to see them?"

They crowded forward, silent and intent, scrutinizing the bits of paper with eyes stupefied with strain and fatigue.

The oblong at the right was a check for fifty thousand dollars, dated October thirty-first, and signed with Neil Sheridan's sprawling schoolboy signature. And the envelope at the left bore the same amorphous and juvenile scrawl. It read:

Doug, you may call this a loan, but you damn well know what I call it. And I swear to God that I'll make you see it my way before we're through. S.

"Well, Sheridan?"

Sherry turned blurred eyes in the direction of the dead level of that voice.

"Well what?"

"Have you any explanation of these things?"

"Naturally I've got an explanation. But before we get at it you might give me one as to how you got hold of them."

"I'll be delighted to. The check was in a wallet that slipped off the sofa onto the chapel floor while we were moving it in. I found the note pinned on the pillow in King's room while Ray and I were patrolling the house. Now let's hear yours."

"All right; get it straight." He pushed the nearest oblong toward Dart with an impatient thumb. "I gave Doug that check this evening, before dinner. He was flat broke . . . not that any of you give a damn about that! He lost close to every nickel he had when the boom crashed in Miami and Palm Beach—had to sell out everything in the world but the shirt off his back and the links in his cuffs: he's been up against it ever since. Well, yesterday he got wind of something that's going to recoup the whole damn thing. They've struck oil on one of the old Panama plantations, and they agreed to let him in again on the ground floor if he could raise a hundred and fifty thousand by the end of the week. I've been flourishing around a bit on the Exchange lately, and fifty thousand was the best I could manage. . . . I wish to God I could have made it the whole thing."

"I see. What plantation was it that had struck oil?"

"He didn't say; he'd sworn not to tell a soul. If it ever got out, the stock would go up like a skyrocket, naturally."

"Naturally. . . . So you handed him over fifty thousand, in spite of the fact that you were rather pinched yourself. Now the note, Sheridan."

"Well, I wanted Doug to take the damned fifty

thousand as a present." He drew the back of his hand across the reddened eyes, and glared defiance into the grim skepticism of the face across the table. "Oh, sure, I know it sounds fishy, but it's God's truth. . . . You know a whole lot, Dart, but you don't know the only things that matter. You don't know that I owe every last penny I have in the world to Doug King, and that, thanks to him, I own enough stock in some of those plantations down there to make a dollar for every cent I've got if we ever strike oil. If Doug hadn't tipped me off ten years ago to put every nickel I could get into the Bonita and Ventura plantations, I wouldn't have been in any position to give him fifty thousand dollars tonight, or to lend them to him either. He insisted on giving me his personal note for the check and he said he had some mortgages to turn over to me for security. I tore up the note and wrote that thing there to let him know again that I wanted the money to be a gift, free and clear—I knew he was worried sick about the whole thing, and I thought that if I couldn't get hold of him for another talk this evening, it might buck him up to find the note on his pillow when he turned in. That's what I was doing in the north corridor. And that's all there is to that . . . except that he didn't turn in. Too simple for you, by a long shot, isn't it?"

"I had something even simpler," said Gavin Dart, his eyes on the white slips. "Blackmail."

"Blackmail? What in hell are you talking about?"

"You and King were mixed up in some fairly shady deals at the outset of this highly successful career of yours, weren't you, Sheridan?"

"You——"

"Easy does it, my dear fellow. I don't know much about your affairs, I confess, but I've made a point of

learning all that I could about Doug King this last year . . . and I've learned quite a bit. He's been slipping from one disreputable proposition to another for a good ten years, and it's your wife who assures me that both of you were as thick as—thieves. Not let's see how my theory works out. Suppose that at some past period you had been—well—indiscreet enough to have gone in with Doug in one of his less savoury enterprises. Suppose that he, desperate as he was for money, decided to remind you of that fact and of the damage that publicity as to it might do to you—suppose he pointed out that for fifty thousand dollars there wouldn't be any publicity. . . . Now, then, this note of yours. 'Doug, you may call this a loan but you damn well know what I call it. And I swear to God that I'll make you see it my way before we're through.' Read from my point of view it might turn from a generous reassurance to a rather ugly threat, mightn't it? Let's go a little further. Let's suppose that you overheard Jill making her rendezvous with Doug on the sofa, and came down here to see whether you couldn't persuade him that you needed that fifty thousand as much as he did, and that blackmail wasn't a safe game to play with you for what might well be the rest of your life. Suppose that in groping your way into the room your hand came in contact with that table by the door—the card table that had the knife on it. Suppose that under that hand you felt the knife that——"

Sherry, his clay-coloured countenance suddenly and violently congested, pounded the table before him until the papers danced.

"Shut up, will you? Shut up before I——"

"I shouldn't go in for threats much just now, if I were you, Sheridan! I think that under the circumstances

they make a bad impression. Suppose you tell us something about this old Panama proposition instead. . . . It was your law firm that approved the legal aspects of the stock issues of the Bonita and the Ventura plantations, wasn't it?"

Sherry twisted in his chair, his frantic eyes seeking for someone. They came to rest just short of the shadows near the door, where Tom Ross stood, slim and pale and shabby, his arm about his Chatty, his blue eyes chilled to gray.

"Oh, there you are! I was wondering why you weren't in on this—you're the guy I have to thank for it all, aren't you? Well, come on over here now and tell 'em all about how once upon a time you lifted up your hand and swore never to break a professional confidence. We're all due for a good long laugh about this time! Come on and give it to us."

Tom Ross removed his arm very gently from the small figure beside him, and came forward toward the fire, Chatty pattering docilely at his heels, her woebegone countenance too heavily saturated in misery for this last indignity even to stir it.

"Wrong again, Sherry. I'm precisely as much of an ass to-day as I was ten years ago; Dart went elsewhere for his information."

Gavin Dart said smoothly:

"I'm afraid your nerves aren't at all what they ought to be, Sheridan. You're confoundedly jumpy—especially jumpy when it comes to conclusions! As a matter of fact, my investigations of Doug King's career took me straight back to Panama itself, and I found out all I wanted to know right there—and a bit over for luck. I'm right about the firm of Maury, Kountz, Sheridan, and Ross

vouching for the legal aspects of the issue, am I not, Ross?"

"Entirely right," said Tom Ross, in a voice as colourless as his face.

"You were fully aware at the time that you approved these facts of the boundary dispute that was taking place between the governments of Costa Rica and Panama?"

"Fully aware."

"And you knew that if the Costa Rican government could prove its claims, not a share of that stock was worth the paper that it was printed on?"

"We knew that, too."

"Listen to me for a moment, will you?" demanded Sherry frantically. "We weren't passing on their damned title. It was up to those fellows down there to search that, and they did search it, and it was good, wasn't it? It was good as gold; better! Doug wasn't hiring a bunch of detectives; he was hiring a law firm."

"Still, if you'd gone to the trouble to investigate, you'd have found that the chances were about ten to one on Costa Rica?"

"About twenty to one," corrected Ross quietly.

"Not a very pretty business, Ross?"

"Not so very pretty," agreed Tom Ross. He glanced up swiftly, met Chatty's tragic and bewildered eyes, and gave her a strange little smile, tender and consoling, at which her lips curved a tremulous and obedient reply.

Trudi leaned forward abruptly.

"Wait a minute, Gavin. Tom, just when did you say this plantation thing came up?"

"I didn't say."

"Just when was it, then?"

"Some time in 1919, I believe."

"In the spring?"

"In the spring."

"Just before you left the firm?"

"Why, yes, Trudi; just before I left the firm."

"I see . . ." said Trudi Sheridan. "That was it, of course. Why didn't you tell Gavin why you left the firm, Tom?"

"I didn't think that it would interest him particularly."

Sherry said, his voice suddenly shaken by an immense, an appalling bitterness:

"Oh, I think it would interest him, all right. And I think you know why."

Tom Ross asked:

"Are you trying to pick a quarrel with me, old boy? I wouldn't."

"Go ahead—tell him!" commanded Sherry fiercely, far beyond the control of that quiet voice. "Trudi thinks you're keeping your mouth shut because you're a little tin god on wheels, that wouldn't let me down by telling Dart that you got out of the firm because you thought that the plantation stuff was crooked. Well, I think you aren't telling him because you don't want him to know that you had a bloody row with Doug in 1919, and that you've hated him like rat poison ever since because you believe that he ruined your career."

"I know that he ruined my career," said Tom Ross, and once more the line of sweat edged the fine, sensitive lips. "I know that he has ruined Chatty's life, and my children's lives, too. I know that I can't give my children proper medical attention when they're ill, or proper education when they're well, and that the only evening

dress my wife has had since I can remember was made to-night with nail scissors out of a three-year-old street frock. I know all of these things, and I think that Doug King was a little bit cheaper and rottener and viler than rat poison. . . . Is that what you wanted me to tell Gavin Dart?"

"You're crazy; what did Doug have to do with your career after you cut loose from me?"

"He had this to do with it. Since the day I forced you into choosing between Doug and me, and you chose Doug, there's not been one opportunity that he's let go by to spread and intensify the rumour that I was forced out of that firm because of unprofessional and discreditable conduct on my part."

"You're out of your head. Doug never——"

"Sherry, I know that I'm a failure, but you know that I'm not a fool. These rumours have been getting back to me for a good many years now; they've reached my own firm—they've reached half a dozen other firms that were disposed to be friendly to me—in at least four cases I learned that Doug knew the fellows that were putting me on my guard as to those rumours. He knew that if I were ever in a strong position I might be able to do him some damage; and he took excellent care that I should never get in one—such excellent care that to-day I'm barely more than an underpaid law clerk while you're able to give Trudi seventy pair of shoes a year."

"Trudi!" Sherry turned his livid face to the still figure in the corner of the love-seat with a dreadful sound of laughter. "Trudi—that's *good!* So you haven't got anything, haven't you? You poor lucky stiff, you've got everything in the world! You've got kids instead of parrakeets and fan-tailed goldfish—you've got a home

instead of a travelling circus—you've got a wife who thinks you're a genius and a hero and a martyr instead of a total loss, and if you want Trudi, you've got her, too —you've had her ever since the first day you laid eyes on her!"

"Oh, Sherry, you fool!" Trudi's voice, barely above a whisper, stayed the frantic torrent for a moment. She sat rigid, her eyes fixed unflinchingly on the desperate face, her hands wrung together until the knuckles gleamed white, while over the level eyes, the steady lips, wave after wave of dreadful and engulfing crimson broke and ebbed.

"You're right, I'm a fool! But Tom isn't—didn't you hear him tell you so? Tom knows that all he has to do any time he wants you is to whistle and you'll come running. Whistle now, why don't——"

The crack of a hand against his cheek echoed through the appalled silence like a pistol shot, and Chatty the meek, Chatty the gentle, Chatty the soft and yielding, stood glaring down at him like a miniature of the avenging angel.

"How dare you talk about her that way? How dare you?" She flashed by him, without so much as a glance at the red bars of her fingers against the livid cheek, dropping on her knees beside the love-seat. "Trudi, darling, don't listen. Trudi, don't mind . . . we know it's not true—we know it's just that Sherry's gone mad."

Trudi, from whose face and throat the scarlet waves had ebbed, said quietly through white lips:

"I don't mind. . . . And you mustn't mind that Sherry's not really mad. He's quite sure, you see, that Tom won't whistle." She lifted the small, sturdy hand, with its dimpled knuckles and reddened palm, and held

it for a moment against her cheek, as though in that brief contact she found healing. "Chatty, you love me, don't you?"

"So much, Trudi."

"And I love you—so much. Let's forget everything else and remember that—that and one other thing. Remember that there's never been one day since you found each other that I haven't been glad that you had Tom and that he had you. Don't forget that, will you, Chatty?"

"No, dear."

"Then suppose we all forget the rest and try to get back to civilization again. Let's start Sherry on his way." She rose, a little stiffly, moving forward on steady feet, and stood staring down in silence at the scarlet grill on the cheek nearest her, at the tortured eyes, humble, imploring, terrified as a whipped dog's.

After a moment she said slowly:

"Sherry, if I've made you or anyone else think that I despise you, I deserve everything you've said—I deserve more. Don't go back on me now, old boy. . . . Friends again?"

He caught convulsively at the outstretched hand, his face twisting and straining for the control that Trudi wanted.

"Trudi—my God, my God, Trudi, what made me do that? Trudi——"

"Friends it is, then. Don't take it too hard, Sherry; we're all in the same boat. . . . I've been acting like a beast myself for hours! I don't think any of us seem temperamentally adapted for a murder. . . . Well, Gavin —still think it was Sherry?"

"I've about given up thinking." He looked as weary as the weary voice. "The only valid reason that I can

see for eliminating Sherry is that we've temporarily substituted someone else."

"Someone else?"

"We've substituted Tom Ross, haven't we? You were in the chapel at the time the murder was committed, weren't you, Ross?"

"I don't know. As it happens, I don't know when the murder was committed."

"At approximately that time, then. And you were in this room again when the phonograph started playing, weren't you?"

"No. You're quite wrong there. I wasn't more than halfway across the chapel when the phonograph started up."

Dart smiled, but not as though he were amused.

"I wasn't trying to trip you up, my dear fellow. What I meant was that theoretically you had access to this room on both occasions."

"I'm afraid that I haven't attained your Olympian detachment," replied Tom Ross pleasantly. "I thought that what you were after were facts, not theories. . . . The fact is that I wasn't in the room."

"And if you're linking the phonograph and the murder together, you're letting Sherry out, aren't you?" inquired Trudi dispassionately. "It would be a little difficult even for you, Gavin, to evolve a theory that would bring Sherry from the ladder to this room in three or four seconds."

"Sherry might have had an accomplice."

"You mean me?" She considered this for a moment in silence. "Yes, I see what you mean. If Jill could have slipped into the room in the dark, so could I—and out of it, too, if it comes to that. Well, that seems to let all of us in—Larry, Jill, you, Hanna, Tom, Kit—oh, the

whole shooting match. . . . And that leaves us just about where we started, doesn't it?"

"A little worse off, I should say."

"All right, then; let's start again. Let's start with those three or four questions that you wanted cleared up. You found out about Kit and Panama, but you haven't found out what Doug wanted Lindy for, or what upset Ray when she went upstairs, have you? Why not have another go at that?"

"An excellent suggestion, Trudi—and a fairly well-merited rebuke, I'm afraid. Very well; here is where the clouded Master Mind abandons the blind alleys of speculation and returns to the straight and narrow path of facts. Lindy, will you tell us now why Doug King called you upstairs just before the game started?"

Lindy lifted her eyes from the twisted pearls, looked at him pensively for a moment, as though she were trying to weigh imponderable facts, and then said, with a curious and inflexible finality: "No."

"No?" He echoed it blankly. "And why not, may I ask?"

"Because, Gavin, the thing that Doug wanted to discuss with me didn't involve simply myself. Other people were seriously involved in it, and as it was an extremely personal matter, I'm sure that you'll forgive me for not being willing to drag them into all of—this." She smiled faintly, a piteous and gallant smile for all the tremorless serenity of her voice, and added, "You've warned us of the terrors of cross-examination, Gavin. You aren't going to subject us to it now?"

He said quietly:

"No. But I wish that you could see your way clearer to helping us. Well, Ray, how about you?"

The small creature curled dejectedly in the corner of

the love-seat turned on him a pair of round hazel eyes, tragically forlorn in the wan face.

"Gavin, I don't want to talk about—about those things—not now, please. Oh, Gavin, if you knew how absolutely dead I am I do think you'd let me alone, just for to-night. I'm absolutely *hollow* I'm so tired, and everything's all mixed up in my head. . . . I'll only get it more mixed up if I try to tell it now—truly, truly I will. Joel, don't let him make me tell!'"

Joel, a brown hand linked securely about the small limp paw, murmured cajolingly:

"Honey, if you tell him what happened then, Gavin'll let me take you upstairs, and tuck you into bed, and I'll sit right there beside you until you go sound asleep and forget the whole dreadful mess. That's straight, isn't it, Gavin?"

"Perfectly straight."

"Can I keep the light on all night?"

"You can keep the light on for the rest of your natural life, darling. Now tell us about those ghosts of yours—come on."

"They weren't—ghosts." She shuddered, her fingers clutching desperately at the reassurance of Joel's. "Gavin, it all makes me seem like such an idiot; I don't know what happened to me. . . . I've been like an imbecile all night, and this just finished me. I was pretty nearly demented with that wind and my head before I started upstairs, and then when I got there it was all dark except for one light 'way at the end of one of the corridors, and I got frightened again—only worse. I remembered that there was a little jog near my bedroom, and I could see one there, too—and then something banged somewhere—oh, frightfully loud, and just behind me I thought I heard someone laugh a dreadful

little laugh, like—like Damaris . . . and I put my hands over my ears and started running. I couldn't have heard anything anyway, because of that hideous wind. I wanted to shut it out, and when I got to the door I was afraid to take my hands down even for a second—even for the second that it would take to turn the handle. . . . And then I took them down, and turned—and the door wouldn't open. It wouldn't open at all; it was locked. I stood there hanging onto the handle, wondering how I could ever get down those corridors again—wondering why Joel hadn't told me that he'd locked the door, when I heard something move . . . inside. And I heard—a voice." Her own voice, edged with horror, trailed off into space, her eyes following it, dilated with some incommunicable memory.

Gavin Dart asked gently: "Whose voice, Ray?"

"I don't know. It didn't sound like a real voice at all; it sounded like—like an animal's . . . strangled, and choked, and—gagged."

"Could you hear what it said?"

"I don't want to tell you what it said."

"Ray, I'm afraid you'll have to."

She cast a despairing glance at Joel, who stared back at her blankly, his gay face suddenly shadowed with disastrous unease. After a moment he said slowly:

"Go ahead, honey—Gavin's right. Just tell us what it said, and then you won't have to bother about anything more as long as you live. What did it say?"

"Hold my hand tighter; hold it tighter still. . . . It said, 'By God—I'll get you for this to-night—if I burn for it.' And then I knew—then I knew that it wasn't my room that I was outside of—then I knew that this door belonged to someone else, and that something dreadful was happening behind it. . . . And I let go the handle,

and I ran, I ran like mad, down those halls and down those stairs—I thought that I'd die before I got to the foot of them. And Joel was waiting there . . . and I nearly went mad begging him to take me away, and he didn't take me away . . . he only laughed at me. He never took me away at all. And that's all, Gavin—that's all, truly. Now can I go?"

"In just one minute, Ray. Does anyone remember who was out of the room at the time that Ray went for the aspirin?"

"I was," said Kit Baird, with commendable promptness. "And so was Doug King. I'd gone up to give him some iodine for that cut of his."

"And it was your voice that Ray heard?"

Kit slanted his eyebrows at him inquiringly.

"My voice? Oh, Your Honour! Isn't it fairly steep to ask a fellow to split the faggots for his own funeral pyre?"

"Not so steep as to deny my question, I'm afraid, Kit."

Kit, swinging his long legs pensively, bestowed a brief smile on the rigid gravity of his inquisitor.

"Still, you know, that's just exactly what I'm going to do. The voice of prudence is earnestly counselling me to enter a blanket denial of the entire episode, but prudence and I don't get on very well together. And as we're all mighty seekers after the truth, I am now going to confide in you that it wasn't my voice—it was Doug's."

"And are you going to confide in us why Ray told us that it sounded so strangled as to be unrecognizable?"

"Even that, Your Honour. It sounded strangled for the main and simple reason that at the time I was engaged in choking Mr. King a little—oh, not enough to

really hurt him, but quite enough to upset him rather badly."

"Why?"

"Are there supposed to be no limits to my philanthropy? Very well—in one last burst of confidence I'll confess that Doug had been getting fairly well on my nerves all evening, and that I found our last little chat over the iodine just a little bit more than I could stick. He was touching up the Panama episode a bit, and I was fairly fed up on Panama . . . so I stopped him. I don't think he was quite through—that was what Ray heard him complaining about."

Gavin Dart said gravely: "I wish that I felt that you could laugh yourself out of this nightmare, Kit."

The red-headed young man stopped swinging his legs. After a moment he said, with no particular emphasis: "Thanks, old boy. I wish so, too."

Joel Hardy said desperately to the man at his elbow: "But look here, Dart, you don't believe that if Kit had anything in God's world to do with it he'd be telling you all the rigmarole about choking Doug? He's not exactly a moron, you know. Someone else is mixed up in this as sure as shooting. Look here, I'll bet if we could find out who was monkeying with this phonograph, we'd find out who did Doug in! Listen, how about this? Suppose whoever did it had an accomplice of some kind —you know; you thought of that yourself! Suppose he had to communicate with this accomplice, and didn't know how in heaven's name he could get at him—or her—as long as we were all penned up in this room. Well, he'd try a note, wouldn't he? And he'd think this phonograph would be a slick place to plant it. You could wedge it in almost anywhere in at the back here, or along the sides—or . . . by golly, I've got it at last! Lord, what

dumb-bells we've been. All anyone who wanted the prize hiding place of the world would have to do would be to take this record and slip the note under, and there he'd be. Now watch old Dr. Hardy—one—two—three—and there you are, by crackie!"

He lifted the black disk with a mighty flourish, and stood transfixed, staring down at the green felt circle with eyes suddenly and appallingly enlightened. There on the circle, staring up at him malevolently, lay four aces, neatly spread out like a little fan—and across the face of the ace of spades ran a little trail of red drops.

Gavin Dart said quietly:

"Just a minute, please, Hardy. I'd like a look at those, if you don't mind."

He lifted them carefully, turned them over with fingers almost surgical in their deft precision, ran one swiftly over the patterned back and said curtly:

"They're marked. Here, in the middle of this arabesque. The design is pricked—you can see for yourself; or rather you can feel it."

He paused for a long moment, staring down at them, and then turned slowly to Kit. He said:

"These are the cards that we were playing with this evening, aren't they, Baird?"

Kit took them from the outstretched hand, and stood staring down at them thoughtfully. After a moment he drew his finger slowly across the invisible pricks, smiled slightly, and handed them back to their erstwhile guardian.

"These are indubitably the cards," he said.

Gavin Dart asked, his voice gravely troubled: "The aces that you held in the last hand that we played?"

"The very aces."

"What should you call these stains on the ace of spades, Baird?"

"I should call them blood," replied Kit coolly. "What should you call them?"

Gavin Dart, his low-pitched voice a trifle lower, said, "I, too, should call them blood." He dropped the cards on the table beside him and sat down rather abruptly in the capacious chair at his elbow, leaning his head against his hand as though the end of the chase found him unexpectedly weary.

Joel, who had been staring at the grim little objects with stunned fascination, emerged from his stupefied contemplation into galvanized activity.

"Well, but, Kit, why for the love of God don't you tell him where the stains came from?"

"You're a nice loyal young fool!" said the red-headed young man, still smiling. "The blood came from Doug King, as a matter of fact, Dart—but before he was killed, not after. He cut himself at the card table, if you remember."

"Yes, I remember perfectly. I had forgotten, though, that the blood actually got on the cards."

"I believe Joel spoke of it at the time—and I had excellent reason for remembering it later. That isn't what's bothering you though, is it?"

"No; you're quite right. That isn't what's bothering me at all. I think that you can help me with my major difficulty, if you care to, Kit."

"I'm at your service entirely." Kit poured three inches out of the decanter into his glass, added a handful of ice and a modest hint of water, and added, pensive and ironic, "It's a little difficult to see where else I could be."

Dart agreed without raising his head.

"I can quite see that. Then would you be good enough to tell me just how the marked aces from your last hand came to be concealed under this phonograph record?"

Lindy, lifting dark eyes, asked quietly in her voice of silver dreams:

"Why not ask me?"

"You?" Gavin Dart turned incredulous eyes from the smouldering copper of Kit's arrogant head to the velvet smoothness of the little dark one against the dim brocade. "Why should I ask you?"

She let the pearls that she had been twisting into a rope all evening slip through her fingers as though she no longer needed them, and leaned forward out of the shadows into the light.

"Because it was I who put them there." In the dancing firelight the clear serenity of the small, pale face was as unflawed as the voice. "Because it was I who murdered Doug King."

VIII

The snap of Kit Baird's pencil between his fingers cracked sharp as a pistol, and Gavin Dart's voice sounded curiously flat after it.

"I don't believe you."

"Don't you, Gavin? Is that because truth is so hard to believe? . . . I'd begun to think that you could believe almost anything—you're really almost as bad as the White Queen! You remember, she practised until she could manage as many as six impossible things before breakfast; I think that you could manage seven." A light, too delicate, too remote and elusive for mirth, hovered behind the shadowing lashes, and Gavin Dart turned his eyes from it, as though he found it intolerable.

"You could believe that Sherry, who adored him, killed Doug for fifty thousand dollars, couldn't you? You could believe that Tom did it for a shattered business career—that Kit did it for four cards with little pricks on their backs. You've believed quantities and quantities of other things almost as foolish and almost as dangerous, and yet you can't believe the simplest of truths. Why can't you, Gavin?"

He said, out of the deathly silence through which the limpid voice ran like a brook:

"Because it's sheer insanity. All this has been too much for you, Lindy; it's been pretty well too much for the lot of us. Hysteria has more than one way of hitting

us, my dear, and this happens to be the way it's hit you. You are no more capable of committing murder than that baby of mine at home."

She said:

"I hope for his sake—and for yours—that you're as wrong about that as you are about everything else. Why don't you think that I killed Doug, Gavin? No, don't bother to tell me—I'll tell you. You don't think that I killed him because I have long lashes, and small hands, and pretty manners. They're none of them real deterrents to murder, I think—Damaris had them, too, but Sidney died at his desk for all of them."

"It's that story that's turned your head." Gavin's voice was harsh with pain. "You'd never have so much as thought of trying to make us believe a monstrous thing like this if it hadn't been for that worn-out tale of blood and revenge . . . Lindy, do you realize that you are practically the only person here who hadn't the shadow of a motive for killing Doug?"

"You are wrong again. I am the only person here who had a motive urgent enough to make murder the only solution."

"What motive?"

"Doug King was trying to ruin someone that I loved. . . . He gave me only one alternative to prevent that ruin—he forgot that there were two. . . . I chose the second."

"The second?"

"I chose murder," said the lovely tranquil voice.

Chatty, who had been staring at her with eyes that terror had burned dry of tears, made a strange little sound, and covered her face with her hands.

For a moment no one spoke at all, and then Jill Leighton, holding the smock that covered the blood-

stains together with hands that shook uncontrollably, asked in a voice that did not shake at all: "Was it because of Sunny, Lindy?"

"No . . . not Sunny. I loved her, too—I loved her dreadfully—and Doug would have been kinder to have used a knife to kill her. But Sunny's lucky—Sunny's dead. He couldn't hurt her any more. . . . It wasn't Sunny."

Joel tried twice before he found enough voice to ask the question that hammered through that clamorous silence.

"Who was it then?"

"Don't you know, Joel? Oh, I should have thought that you at least would have known. You love him, too, don't you? . . . It's Kit."

The red-headed young man did not move. He stood looking down at her, the broken fragments of pencil still in his hand. After an interminable moment he said in a voice that he did not lift a fraction of a tone, but that was as warning and challenging as a tocsin: "Lindy . . ."

She met it, gentle and unflinching.

"You didn't want me to tell them that, did you, Kit? You didn't want me to tell even you that . . . I know. But how else would they understand? I'm sorry, but truly, I had to make them understand." She turned back to Gavin Dart, a little smile edging the blanched lips. "You see, Gavin, he doesn't love me at all, so it makes all this a good deal worse for him. . . . I've loved Kit for twelve years—frightfully. He didn't know it until to-night, when I told him that I didn't want to live without him any longer. It isn't supposed to be a thing that nice girls do, but I believe they do it rather oftener than they're supposed to. And I imagine that

almost any man reacts just as Kit reacted—a little annoyed, a little disturbed—and a little—oh, just a little—touched. . . . But I don't think that most girls mean by love what I mean. When I hear all of you talking about love, it's as though you were speaking a strange language. You talk about something all compounded of ambitions and standards and exigencies and desires—something as mysterious to me as integral calculus or double-entry book-keeping. . . . When I say love, I mean thunder behind my ears, and lightning behind my eyes, and the stars in my hands . . . " She unclenched the small slim hands slowly, staring down into them as though in their cupped palms the invisible star still shone, terrible and beautiful. For a moment the terror and the beauty shone across the pallor of the small bent face—and was gone before those who watched it could draw breath. "If you ask Kit, he'll tell you what he told me . . . that he's worthless, and worse than worthless; that he's a rotter and a dead-beat and a card sharp. I don't believe any one of those things; but if every one of them were Heaven's truth—if every one of them were proved ten times over—if every one of them were blazoned on banners in the market place, it wouldn't make a feather's weight of difference to me. He's Kit; nothing else matters . . . nothing else matters in the whole world. He is the whole world."

The red-headed young man who was her whole world made no sign that he even heard her; only his eyes rested on her, unswerving and inscrutable.

"Don't you want to know how I killed Doug, Gavin? Or should I wait and tell that to the police?"

Gavin was not looking at her; he was looking at the broken pencil in Kit Baird's fingers. After a moment he said quietly:

"You had better tell us first, I think. Then we can decide just how much to tell the police later."

"Oh, I think that I'd better tell them everything—don't you?" asked the crystal voice. "If I start telling some bits and leaving out others, I'm apt to get badly mixed up, and I don't want to do that. They mightn't understand at all why I did it, you see, and that seems to me rather important."

"I am afraid that it may not seem so important to them." His voice was heavy as lead—his eyes were heavy, too, as though it were an intolerable effort to keep them open, fixed on the violets and pearls and the white glimmer that were Lindy.

"Won't it, Gavin? I should have thought—but of course you know so much more about them than I do; you're probably quite right. . . . Still, I think that I'll take the King of Heart's advice: you know, begin at the beginning, go on till you're through, and then stop. The beginning——" She paused for a moment, as though she were listening, and her eyes went past the huddled group about the fire to the dark hall. "The beginning was when Doug King called to me from the head of those stairs. . . . I was considerably annoyed at his calling me in that way; he'd been worrying me a good deal all evening, partly because he'd been rather insolent, but principally because I could see that he was doing his level best to start a quarrel with Kit, and I was desperately anxious not to have that happen. You see, Kit had come back to us, after such a long, long time—and I didn't want him to be forced by any ugly brawling or scandal into going away again—I mean really away, out of our reach, out of our lives, into that strange land where he thinks that he belongs, leaving us as much shut out as though we weren't really alive at all. I didn't want that. I was will-

ing to go to any lengths of compromise and conciliation to prevent it. So that was why I went up to him when he called as though he were the landlord of this inn and I were a little barmaid, docile and eager. I went to him just as eagerly and docilely as that barmaid—and with no more sinister intentions. . . . Doug was waiting at the head of the stairs. He said, 'Come to my room, will you? There's something I want to show you.' I said, 'But, Doug, what is it? Can't you bring it here?' He put his hand on my wrist, and said, 'No. I didn't get you up here to argue with you. I got you here to tell you a few things.' His voice was as hard and coarse as a—as a mule driver's, and his face was hard and coarse, too—it was as though someone had drawn a sponge, dipped in filth and venom, across it, wiping out the old Doug, and leaving only this ugly stranger. I said, 'Very well—I'll come. But take your hand off my wrist, please.' He didn't take it off; he clamped it down a little harder, and pulled me after him down the corridor to his room. . . . It's the farthest room down the north corridor, and for a moment I thought that there must have been a window left open in it—it looked blown to pieces. One of the muslin window curtains was down, and there was a chair tipped over, with a lot of clothes sprawling away from it, and one end of the dressing table was swept quite clear; I could see the little leather boxes, and an empty glass and some brushes and collar buttons scattered almost to the door. After a second or so I realized that it couldn't have been rain or wind; there wasn't even a spatter of rain anywhere, and there was another glass and a tall flask on a little candlestick table almost under the window; it hadn't even been touched. . . . I tried to pull my wrist away, and I asked, 'What happened here, Doug?' He said, 'Oh, nothing.

Your precious Kit tried to break my neck, that's all. If he tries it again, I'll break his—with a rope.' I said, 'Is that what you called me up here to tell me?' And he said, 'No. Come over here.' . . . I knew exactly what they meant, the first time that I saw them; there were four of them, lying there on the desk, and the one nearest me—the ace of spades—had a little shower of red drops spraying across its face. They were the four aces from Kit's pack of cards that we'd been playing with—the four aces that you have there beside you, Gavin. And before I could turn my eyes away, I knew why Doug had brought me to his room to see them. He turned them over, and I stood there looking down at the backs; they were red, too—red and black, like little Turkish carpets. After a minute he took my finger and drew it down across the back of the nearest one. In the centre of the carpet I could feel something small and rough, like—like a fairy nutmeg grater. It made me—it made me feel deathly sick, and I tried to pull my finger away, but he wouldn't let me. He stood there pressing it down, and smiling at me . . . dreadfully. After a minute he said, 'These belong to that precious blackguard of yours. If you're a very, very good child, I'm going to give them to you for a wedding present.' I said, 'What do you mean?' And Doug said, 'What I say. I have proof right here that he's a swindler and a card sharp, and if we don't strike a bargain in the next five minutes, I'm going to light a fuse that will blow him straight from here to hell. It'll take me just about ten minutes to ring up every paper in Washington and tell them that that well-known sportsman, Mr. Christopher Baird, has been caught out cold, cheating an exclusive little group of his best friends at poker. And just for good luck I'll call the police in on it, too, and lodge a

charge of criminal assault. He damn near killed me trying to get these cards away, and someone on the other side of that door knew it, too.' I asked, 'What is it that you want me to do?' Doug laughed, and let go of my finger. He said, 'It's five minutes to twelve. I want to give you plenty of time to think things over. Big-hearted, that's what I am! But if you haven't been able by the end of the first round of Hide in the Dark to make up your mind to invite your guests to another of these delightful little reunions about Saturday, to celebrate the wedding of young Mrs. Marsden to young Mr. King, I'm very much afraid that I'll have to use the phone to Washington.' You know, Gavin, the funny part is that when he said that I didn't feel anything at all—not anything. My head felt suddenly quite light and empty and peaceful . . . you know, the way it does after the second breath of ether. I thought, 'This isn't real. This is a dream; nothing matters in dreams.' I went by him to the door, and opened it. Doug said, 'That's your answer, is it? I'm to turn your lover over to the well-known mercies of the law and the press?' I said, 'No, no—my answer's yes, of course. I'll ask them for Saturday just as soon as the game's over. May I have the cards?' He picked them up and put them in his pocket, and when he got close enough to put his hand on my shoulder he said, 'My dear girl, do I look like that particular brand of jackass? If you're a good, obedient little wife and do just exactly what Doug says, you shall have one whole one a year—and just to show you what a lucky girl you are, I'll start you off next Saturday with the ace of spades.' . . . One a year—that's four years. . . . I said, 'Very well. Then that's all, isn't it? Let's go down.' He kept his hand on my shoulder all the way down the stairs, but when we got to the bottom he took it away

and gave me a little pat, and went on into the room ahead of me. My head still had that heavenly light feeling, but it felt a little giddy, too, and I reached for the edge of the card table, and stood leaning against it. I could hear you all talking, and I could hear my voice answering, but if you were to tear me into pieces, Gavin, I couldn't tell you what we said. Because there, right under my fingers, lying on top of those scattered cards and poker chips, was that knife—that little knife that Doug had said was so sharp. . . . I was still staring at it when the lights went out—and when Doug crossed over to Jill by the window I could feel how cold the blade was, and I wondered whether it was as sharp as Doug said. . . . I wasn't paying much attention to what they were whispering, but suddenly I heard something about the purloined letter—and then Doug said quite clearly, 'How about the big sofa—the one by the fire?' —and I knew—I knew perfectly what he meant. I had that chiffon handkerchief knotted around my wrist; I unknotted it and wrapped it round the knife, and started for the hall. Everyone was running and calling by then, and I called to them to wait for me, and ran on after them, up the stairs. . . . I came straight down them again after the gong sounded." She paused, staring down at the twisted pearls between her fingers—twisted tight, tight like a rope. . . . After a long moment she said softly, "That's really all, isn't it? . . . He must have thought it was Jill when I came up behind him, because he didn't move or make a sound. . . . I dried my hands on the chiffon handkerchief after I threw the knife away, but I must have got the blood on the violets when I bent over to get the cards out of his pocket. I slipped them into the front of my dress and walked out into the hall just a second or so before Jill screamed. That scream—

that scream nearly rocked the earth out from under me. I didn't know that Jill was anywhere near, and for one ghastly moment I thought that I'd gone mad, and that I was making that hideous noise myself. And then I heard you all running, and shouting, and falling over things in the dark, and I knew that I wasn't mad at all —that nothing, nothing, no matter how dreadful it is, can drive you mad. When the lights went on I held my hand out to see whether it was steady. . . . Gavin, it was steadier than yours."

The man whose hand was not steady put down his glass very carefully. He asked: "And it was you who put the cards under the record?"

"Yes. My bracelet caught, just when I slipped the last one in. I was coming back to get them and the handkerchief to-morrow."

"Where is this handkerchief, Lindy?"

"It's over there, stuck down in the corner of the big wing chair by the window. Kit, will you get it, please? I don't—I don't want to touch it."

The red-headed young man laid the two scraps of pencil neatly on the mantel and crossed the room without a glance at the fragile loveliness deep in the green chair.

"There s one more thing that I want to tell you before you do—whatever you ought to do with me," she said, her eyes still on the rope. "I didn't realize for one moment, for one second, how hideously this was going to involve all the rest of you. . . . I thought that my mind was working beautifully, but I don't believe that it could have been, because I was absolutely sure that if they couldn't prove that any one of us did it, we'd all be immune. I didn't realize at all that it actually made every person here vulnerable. I want you to know that.

. . . I don't know whether I'd have been brave enough to confess everything if you hadn't found the cards, but I didn't—I didn't want to hurt you. I only wanted—dreadfully—to be happy. I still want to be. That's what makes me so wicked."

Kit Baird said from the corner by the window: "There's no handkerchief here, Lindy."

And Lindy flashed by the group of figures, lighter than wind.

"There is—there is—down here in the corner." She raised a white face above empty hands, and said in a strange little voice, "Oh—you took it. Give it back to me, Kit."

The red-headed young man said equably:

"I haven't laid eyes on that handkerchief since midnight. And I strongly suspect, my child, that you know precisely where it is at the present moment." He removed his hands from his pockets, and circled her wrist with two of his fingers, lightly and inflexibly. "Cold, aren't you? Come back to the fire for a minute, then, and let me present the leading tragedienne of the age to the assembled company." She followed him silently, her unwavering eyes fixed on his, something watchful and guarded in their depths, as though far, far below, a bell had struck a distant warning.

When he reached the centre of the firelit circle, he halted, turning her so that the light fell full on the still, upturned face. "Ladies and gentlemen, Rachel and Duse and Siddons herself must have died again of envy under their laurel wreaths this last half hour. I've seen some fairly good ones myself in my day, but never anything that could remotely touch this." His fingers closed faster about the slim wrist as he swung her toward him. "Look at me, Lindy."

She raised once more the velvet eyes, dark and inscrutable.

"I'm just a little displeased with you. I evidently overdid it a bit this evening. I didn't mean you to get the idea that I was the particular type of blackguard that would dangle a noose around a lady's neck to save his own. . . . Did you honestly think that I was going to play this little game?"

She said in a voice that was no more than a breath: "Kit, I do think you've gone mad."

"Mad, have I?" He yielded briefly and noiselessly to mirth. "I'll swear you're magnificent. Stand right here like a good child, will you, until I get through with this. I like you around. . . . Well, Gavin, what's the next move? Do you hunt up some handcuffs for me?"

"Is this your method of announcing that you killed Doug King?"

"I shouldn't have thought that it was necessary to announce it—it's simply transparent, isn't it?"

"What did Lindy have to do with it?"

"Lindy? She had exactly as much to do with it as her black Persian kitten at home. You aren't telling me that you succumbed to any of that superb nonsense?"

Gavin Dart rose slowly, the unlit cigarette that he had been staring at for a good fifteen minutes between his fingers.

"Give me a light, will you? I said at the outset of Lindy's story that I believed her utterly incapable of such a thing. Before she finished it, I'd entirely reversed my opinion. That may, as you say, be a tribute to her histrionic abilities. On the other hand, it may be ability on my part to recognize the truth when I hear it. I'm ready to listen to your version, naturally."

Kit's eyes, careless and mocking, met the cool appraisal more coolly still.

"Good Lord, do we have to prove that we're murderers around this place? Well, get a notary public and swear me in; I have a much more orthodox version than Lindy's, I give you my word."

"Baird, I may be totally wrong, but I should say it would be difficult for any human being to invent on the spur of the moment the wealth of circumstantial detail that Lindy has produced for us here."

"My dear fellow, she hasn't produced one atom of circumstantial detail! You handed her this murder on a silver platter, and she handed it back to you. You told her where she was to stand to overhear the sofa business, where she was to find the knife, what she was to do with it, where she was to put it when she was through. You even gave her the cards under the record, as well as a shrewd analysis of how they got there, and I myself was obliging enough to present her with the blood on the violets. That leaves as Lindy's sole contribution a blood-soaked but undiscoverable handkerchief—which I'm willing to wager is neatly tucked away in some corner, in as immaculate a state as when it emerged this evening. Still, I'll grant that was a masterly touch, Lindy! For a good three minutes you almost managed to persuade even me that by some miracle you'd managed to plant one there, bloodstains and all."

She cried passionately:

"Oh, and you said that you never lied! You can't do this to me—you can't—I won't let you. . . . Give me back that handkerchief."

He asked, half laughing, half compassionate:

"Lindy, don't you know when the game's up? You

know as well as I do that I haven't touched the handkerchief."

"I know as well as you do that you have it this minute—you took it when you were bending over that chair. You can do anything with your hands—look at the things you could do with those cards, and it was just a flimsy rag of chiffon——"

The red-headed young man, abruptly pale, but with the smile slightly deepened, said agreeably:

"Ah, yes—the cards, to be sure. A very palpable hit, my dear! Well, Dart, I'll appeal to you, as an unprejudiced bystander and a police-court habitué. As you can see, the talented young magician has nothing up his sleeves. Now if you'll complete the search in order to convince this doubting little Thomas? I'll keep my hands in the approved position while you run through the pockets. It's quite a large one, isn't it, Lindy? Larger than a man's, shouldn't you say?"

"Almost twice as large."

Dart, running his hands expertly through the coat pockets, said expressionlessly: "There's blood on that right shirt sleeve, Kit."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. Anything else?"

"Yes. There's a revolver in this right hip pocket."

He extended it flat on his palm, glittering and ominous, and Kit flashed it a smile of recognition.

"And a revolver, of course. Go easy with it, will you? It's loaded; I ought to have warned you."

"Are you in the habit of carrying a revolver?"

"My dear fellow, it's practically the only habit I've got! You never can tell when you're going to run into one of those earnest lads nowadays whose sole avocation is to shoot not wisely but too well. It's a pleasure to be right there to greet them. . . . I brought it down here

because I thought it might be handy for target practice. Would you like to take charge of it for the time being?"

"Thanks," commented Gavin drily. "I'm not your custodian yet, you know. To be quite candid, I'm not entirely clear that I ever will be. Your comments on Lindy's dramatic abilities don't entirely clear up her part in the murder, as far as I'm concerned. Here's the revolver."

"Stout fellow! Oh, I'll give you more than dramatic criticism before I'm through, I promise." He pocketed the revolver carelessly, and inquired, still smiling, "All through? You didn't come across the handkerchief by any chance, did you?"

"No." Gavin sat down slowly, his eyes still on the rope twisted tight about Lindy's slim hands. "Is it your contention that Lindy's conversation with King about the cards was invented out of the whole cloth, too?"

"Oh, Lord, no; I think that it was probably fairly accurate reporting. You see, I'd had one myself with him about five minutes before on precisely the same lines. It was quite animated about the time that young Ray over there tried to barge in." He flashed the reassurance of his smile, careless and friendly, in the direction of the small countenance, heavy-lidded with forbidden sleep. "You see, when I went up from the card table I wasn't really particularly keen about ministering to Doug out of the iodine bottle. I'd missed those cards from the table. When I told Lindy to look up, because there wasn't any blood, I suddenly remembered that Doug had shaken some from his finger onto the upper one, and I reached over to slip it in my pocket, because I knew that Lindy was upset already, and that even that much blood would upset her more. . . . And then I saw that it wasn't there—that none of that hand of

mine was there—and it didn't take me the proverbial split second to realize exactly what had happened. Doug's cut finger and his dropping the handkerchief on the hand after he'd pulled it over to him, and his bolting off to his room—all part and parcel of some elaborate dodge that he'd fixed up and was undoubtedly putting through nicely upstairs with no one to bother him at all. All of a sudden I felt a burning desire to know just what particular type of hell he was raising up there . . . and I'm afraid I didn't stop on the way to get any iodine. I didn't stop to knock, either. The only thing I did stop to do was to turn the key in the lock and put it in my pocket after I'd closed the door. I had a dim suspicion that Doug mightn't be as anxious for an uninterrupted conversation as I was."

The fire leapt suddenly into a little fountain of flame, and Kit's hair flamed back—his eyes, flamed too, dark with a grimly amused reminiscence.

"Doug was standing over by the dressing table, with the cards face down in front of him; he was busy as a bee with that black pearl stick pin of his, picking out nice little designs on the centre of each of 'em. He didn't even bother about stopping when he saw who it was that was invading his privacy!"

"The dirty swine!" Joel's expressive countenance was transfixed in outraged comprehension. "You mean he fixed those damn things up himself?"

"Did you think they were my handiwork, old boy? I'm flattered. No, Mr. King was entirely responsible for the decorations; and very neat they were, too. . . . I was all wrong about his not wanting to talk; he wanted to talk quite a lot. He had any amount to say about the past, the present, and the future, and he wasn't exactly encouraging about my part in any of them. . . . He told

me precisely what he was going to do with me, and the cards, and the newspapers—and about the time that he got around to the papers I was fed up to the eyebrows, and I didn't want to hear anything more from Mr. King for a long, long time. I stopped listening and made a grab for the cards, and Doug stopped talking and made a grab for me; and by the time Ray rattled the door knob we'd managed to upset the room no end, and I was having a first-rate time kneeling on Mr. King's chest and kneading nine tenths of the breath out of him. It wasn't until I heard Ray at the door that I realized that I was making an everlasting fool of myself! Getting the cards wouldn't do me any good; he'd simply tell you all that I'd stolen them from him, and then I'd be rather worse off than if I let them alone. . . . So I left him to get his breath back while I borrowed his brushes and straightened out a bit and came on down to this room to decide what the next move should be. . . . I saw the knife lying over there on the table as I came in—and the tub of water off beyond it—and there was my solution, ready-made. Nothing more to bother about at all; I slipped it in my pocket while I was talking to Joel, and came on over to the fire. . . . The real start of Lindy's fairy tale was when she said that she found it there fifteen minutes later."

Lindy whispered, with a soft violence that shook her from head to foot:

"Gavin, don't believe him, Gavin, I swear to you—I swear—that he's lying. Don't believe him."

"Lindy, weren't you ever taught that good children don't interrupt? After that, Dart, I followed out pretty much the procedure that you evolved and Lindy plagiarized, except that I used the priest's stairs; Hanna saw me at the foot and dashed back because she realized

that it wasn't Gavin, and she still thought that she might have time to stop him. In the meantime, I'd got the door open, and crossed the chapel into this room. I only stopped to roll up my sleeves, because I remembered what you said about the blood if you tried the jugular, and how you said to do it. I came up from behind and put one hand over his mouth and turned his head away . . . It didn't take as long as it takes me to tell you. I washed my hands off in the tub before I threw the knife in, and rolled my sleeves down again, that's when I got this stuff on my cuff. I was just starting for the hall when——"

"It was from the violets. You got it from my violets——"

"Gavin, what are we going to do with her? That poor little mind going around like a mouse in a trap—don't you know that even the cleverest little mouse of all never gets out, Lindy? It just wears itself out; and you look so tired already, poor mouse! . . . I'll cut it short; every one of you children ought to have been in bed hours ago. . . . Someone came into the room just as I was getting out of it—Joel, I imagine. I waited a bit, and then slid across the hall into the library. Jill's scream didn't upset me as much as it did some of the rest of you; I knew what she was screaming about, you see. I was the first one at the lights."

"And the cards under the record?"

"Oh, the same process, reversed. It was a God-sent opportunity to get rid of them. I crossed the hall while Lindy was counting—if I hadn't caught my cuff in that infernal thing, it would have worked beautifully. Even as it was, I beat you to the door by a good second, didn't I?" The smile flashed shamelessly. "I'm moderately light on my feet—Nature's favoured me that way, and

I've helped the old girl out by making cork soles part of my standard equipment. In my rather animated career, I've found that it's an excellent idea to walk just a little softer than the other fellow. Half a dozen times tonight I've prayed to be an Indian."

Lindy, her dark eyes fixed on the red head blazing far above her like a beacon, said, slowly and clearly:

"Gavin, he came back to save me. He came back because he was afraid that I'd get caught with the cards."

The red-headed young man took a step toward her and dropped two hands lightly on her shoulders. She did not flinch beneath that imperious touch, but suddenly the small pale face looked smaller and paler, and the deep fringed eyes were immense.

"Lindy, get this straight, will you? It's fairly important. I've stood here listening to this preposterous lunacy of yours for a long, long time—for too long a time, by far. I've tried to laugh it off, because that seemed the easiest thing to do, but I haven't felt much like laughing. You're such a little thing to be so brave—standing up there in your pearls and ruffles, swearing to blood and murder and revenge as cheerfully as any gunman. . . . Now you've had your turn—this is mine. I've only got one thing more to say. If you tell this fairy tale once more as long as you live, I'll take this revolver here and blow my brains out. And if you keep perfectly quiet from now on I'll put up the best fight that I can for my life—I'll do my level best to hire lawyers, and bribe juries, and kidnap judges—because for some unfathomable reason my life seems valuable to you—valuable enough to make you risk your own. . . . Is it a bargain?"

"It's—blackmail, isn't it?"

"I believe you've put your finger on it again. Blackmail it is; we understand each other perfectly. So there's nothing left to do but to say good-night, is there? Because it's long past bedtime, and from now on, Lindy, I have an idea somehow that we're not going to be allowed to see a great deal of each other. I don't believe that confessed murderers can be left to rove about at will, even by amateur custodians." She moved, and his arms were suddenly about her, his cheek against the dark sweetness of her hair. "Darling, I wish I had a prettier place to give you to say good-night than this room full of people and bad dreams. . . . I wish I had that silver beach with a star to wish on for you—or a garden with violets under the leaves . . . violets with no blood on them at all. But since this is the best that I can do, may I kiss you good-night, Lindy?"

She said "Yes," and lifted to him a face swept clear of everything but a submission.

He said:

"Good-night, little Lindy. . . . Sweet dreams," and turned away, leaving her standing unstirring with that lifted face, as though already she had found those dreams.

"That's all then, isn't it, Dart? Though I can give you one entirely tangible bit of evidence, if you'd like it. You thought that the wind had damaged the wires, didn't you? Well—it wasn't the wind. The wires were cut. They were cut about five minutes before Hanna tried to reach your house. And even Lindy isn't resourceful enough to tell us where they're cut, are you, Lindy?"

She spoke again from that distant dream: "No."

"No. But I can tell you, because I cut them. Just at the head of the stairs, near the telephone attached to the

wall. I thought that it might be a pious scheme to keep well out of touch with the police; I cut out a foot or so of wire so that splicing it would be more of a job, in case it was discovered. Any of you any good at that kind of thing?"

There was swift murmur of dissent.

"Well, fortunately for the lot of you, I'm a little better than good; I did a bit of line work abroad, before I went in for despatch riding. There isn't much point in barring the police from now on, and I'll give you a hand with it. Suppose we get along now, and see what we can do with it. Dart, do you see any particular reason why any of the girls should stick it out any longer? Get that child of yours tucked in, Joel!"

Chatty, her lips tremulous but her voice valiant, said clearly, from across the room:

"Good-night, Kit darling."

And Trudi's deep, charming voice, huskier than usual, said slowly:

"You're the best of us, Kit. Get some sleep yourself, why don't you?"

Gavin Dart said:

"I'll join you at the telephone in a minute or so, Baird—just as soon as I get Hanna to her room. I'm inclined to agree with you that the sooner we get in touch with the police the better for all of us, under the circumstances."

Sherry said thickly from the doorway:

"A darned sight better." He caught at the door frame. and added unhappily, "I swear to God I think it's all a rotten dream."

"No dream, old boy. Still, it's rather decent of you to think so." The red-headed young man paused abruptly in the doorway, cast a swift glance after the

last couple vanishing up the dark stairs, a swifter one at the empty room, and lifted his voice.

"Think there're any pliers up there, Joel?"

"No—the tools are all in that closet to the right of the fireplace."

"Right you are; I'll bring 'em along."

He crossed the room on the light, sure feet that had carried him through dark places, and just short of the closet he stopped and wheeled, one hand on the chapel door, the other closed fast over something else—something dark and glittering. Joel Hardy stood staring at him incredulously from the doorway, his young face drawn and old—and then in one headlong bound he was at his side, catching frantically at his arm.

"Oh, for God's sake, Kit—Kit, drop it, will you? We'll get you out of this, I swear. No jury in the world would convict you for killing that filthy swine——"

"Not for murdering a man who threatened to expose me as a card sharp?" He did not move, but something else moved, darkly, across the mockery of his face. "Boy, they'll hang me higher than Haman!"

"Oh, God!" The despairing face contorted in a frenzy of rebellion. "Then why couldn't you keep your mouth shut? You know damn well what she'd do to a jury, with that lovely little soft voice and those eyelashes—all she'd have to do is sit there looking like an angel made out of velvet and moonlight telling them how that hound tried to railroad her into marrying him, and in ten minutes they'd every last one of them be howling like banshees and wishing to God they'd been there to carve his heart out themselves!"

"Joel, I've half an idea that you're exactly right. And that's undoubtedly why you'd stick Ray up there if you were in my boots, and let her bargain for her life with a

dozen butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers rather than risk your own precious skin by suggesting that you knew considerably more about the murder than she did, I suppose?"

"Ray? I'd see them in hell before they touched a hair of her——" He halted, staring wildly at the grimly amused countenance a handbreadth away. "Oh . . . Lindy, of course—sure, I get you. You can't let her pull this sacrifice stuff for you; I can't make my head work any more, but I can see that. Anyway, they'd none of them believe a word she said—a little, soft scrap like that . . . though I'll swear she had me going for a minute, at that. That'll show you how much sense I've got left!"

"You weren't the only one," said Kit drily. "She had everyone else in the room going, though you'll hardly catch them admitting it now. She's rather an amazing child . . . Keep an eye on her for a bit, will you Joel? This is going to hit her fairly hard."

"Kit, listen—juries these days don't hang anyone—anyway, not if you've got a good lawyer, and we'll get you the best lawyer that ever stood a jury on its head. All they'll do to you is shut you up for a while."

"Thirty or forty years, say?" The old smile flashed, but in the startling whiteness of the face the eyes were black. "Forty years to find out whether the filthy hole that's my local habitation is two or three paces long? . . . Thanks all the same, but I can think of pleasanter ways out. . . . This way, for instance." He shifted the little shining thing in his hand, and the fingers on his arm clamped down frantically. "Going to help me, Joel?"

The haggard young race glared back at him desperately. "What do you want me to do—kill you?"

"No. I want you to hold this chapel door for about

ten seconds. They'll all be piling back the second they hear a shot, and I don't want Lindy to run into me—here. She's had enough. Only Larry's taken every damn key in the place, and I can't lock it. Joel, I've never asked a favour of anyone else alive."

Joel dropped his hand abruptly, and turned his face away.

"All right—go ahead. I'd a damn sight rather you shot me."

"You'll live to tell your grandchildren that one worthless devil blessed the day that you were born. Look here, would you—no, no, never mind—someone's coming. Give me ten seconds."

Lindy stood poised for a second, staring past the outstretched barrier of Joel's arms at the closing door. She flashed toward it on the wings of terror itself.

"Where was he going? What was that thing he had in his . . . Let me by! Let me by! Kit!"

"Lindy, don't. Lindy, they'd hang him!—he said so, himself. . . . Don't—don't, dear."

"Kit!" Above that frantic pounding, that frantic voice, rose other voices, drowned beneath its frenzy. "Kit, open that door! God, don't let him . . . don't let him. . . . Kit, it's Lindy—wait—wait—it's Lindy, Kit! Don't—don't——"

It cracked through the terrified clamour, clean, sharp, effortless, stilling it as abruptly as the trump of doom. And for a long moment, in that absolute hush, it seemed as though the sharp messenger of silence and death had sped home to more than one target—it seemed as though it might well have hit Lindy, clinging to the handle, her knees sagging beneath her—Joel, his face turned to the cool panel, his shoulders heaving—Gavin, halted short in his tracks, halfway across the room. It was

Gavin who spoke first, moving quickly, his voice chilled steel:

"Stand away from that door, Hardy."

Lindy turned slowly toward him a face of such frozen terror that for a moment he flinched.

"No need for you to go in there, Lindy. Just let me——"

She swayed toward him, lifting a warning finger.

"Hush! What's that? . . . Listen——"

He heard it before her voice had died, faint but unmistakable, the *put-put . . . put-put-put*—of a motorcycle getting laboriously under way—clearer, sharper, swelling to a comfortable roar. . . .

"By God, he's done it!" yelled Sherry, his eyes bulging in his head. "Come on, you fellows—cut around to the back! Through the service quarters, this way—we can see by his lights which way he's gone——"

He tore through the far door, wrenching it so that it rocked on its hinges, the pack streaming after him, galvanized to sudden and violent life.

Ray called wildly from the hall:

"Trudi—Trudi, we can see from the library windows, can't we? Help me open them—I can't reach!"

"Better from the writing room; it has windows on three sides. We'll be sure to see them from there——"

"But, Trudi, he can ride without lights—he said so himself; that's what he did in France. He'll get away—he'll get away! No one can tell which way he's going——"

Trudi said slowly from the doorway:

"Which way? There's only one way, isn't there? The North Trail to——" She halted abruptly, her eyes seeking the shadows across the hall. After a moment she laid a monitory finger across her lips, cast a swift glance

around the room, empty save for the slim figure by the fire, and asked casually as she moved forward toward the voices and the shadows: "Coming, Jill?"

The girl by the mantel said quietly: "In a minute."

She dropped on her knees before the fire, scooped a little hollow in the embers with the hearth tongs, and dropped something in it—something that caught and flickered up in a rush of dancing flames. She knelt there, her face turned away from the bright burst—shivering as though it left her colder. At the light step behind her she started so violently that Lindy came swiftly forward.

Jill asked: "Did he—get away?"

Lindy turned toward her eyes of black fire in a face of white flame.

"Yes—the motorcycle's gone. He must have used the North Trail. But, darling, what in the world are you doing here? You should have been in bed a long time ago—look, the sky's getting lighter, and outside you could hear the birds——"

The girl by the fire said, not lifting her eyes: "Did you come back to look for something, Lindy?"

Something in her voice arrested the soft murmur, and after a long moment Lindy said in a strange little voice:

"Yes. . . . I came back to look for—a handkerchief."

Jill said:

"You couldn't use that handkerchief, Lindy. It was —stained. It's there; it's burning."

Lindy whispered: "You had it . . . all the time?"

"That's what I came back to the room for when Gavin caught me. I saw a corner of it when I sat in the chair by the window, and I started to pull it out—but it was . . . wet. All my fingers were red with it. . . . That's why I nearly fainted."

"You've known ever since then?"

"Before then, I think. . . . I've had it in my smock pocket ever since. I've been so—so frightened."

"Jill, were you frightened of me?"

"No, darling. Frightened—for you."

The little figure in lavender and pearls slipped to her knees, swift and silent as water her arms fast about that other kneeling figure.

"Jill—darling, darling, you always took care of us; you're so wise—you know everything. You know how far it is to Rio . . . and Samarkand . . . and the moon . . . Jill—Jill, how far is it to Las Cayas in the Bahamas?"

THE END


Characters
"Scene:
Old Manor House"
The Old Graveyard
"Grand Fathers
"Mirror
Mirror
show me the Man"
Time:
"Scene:
all Hallow's Eve


Hallow's
Eve"
Scene
Old Manor House
The
Ghost"
Four
March
"Apples
Hares